New York Times bestselling author of
SEVEN DAYS IN JUNE
A LOVE SONG FOR RICKI WILDE
a novel
TIA WILLIAMS

A.LOVE SONGFOR RICKI WILDE

A Novel

TIA WILLIAMS

GRAND CENTRAL

New York Boston

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Also by Tia Williams

For my eighth grade English teacher, Mr. Marchese, at Osterholz American Junior High School in Osterholz, Germany. He told me I was destined to write novels, and I believed him.

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PROLOGUE

Leap years are strange. And because February 29 exists only every four years, it is a rare, charged day. In the old days, back home, folks whispered that it was an enchanted time. When the veil between this world and the other was gossamer thin.

The same folks also thought you could get pregnant from wearing a boy's shoes. So I never believed them. Until Ricki and Ezra.

Depending upon your level of skepticism, you'll think their story is either (a) evidence that wondrous, unknowable magic exists in the world, or (b) a tall tale. Now, I can't tell you what to believe. But I will say that the truth is usually right under your nose.

So keep your eyes open and pay attention.

Leap years are, indeed, strange. And nothing is what it seems.

CHAPTER 1

BOTANY FLOWERS LATELY

June 11–21, 2023

Twenty-eight-year-old Ricki Wilde possessed many talents. She could spot the chicest fashions in the jankiest thrift stores. She refurbished furniture beautifully. She collected interesting words (like “interrobang”: the combination of an exclamation point and a question mark, used to express dismay). Plus, she cooked exquisite cannabis candy and, within three notes, could pinpoint the exact year of any pop, R&B, or hip-hop song in history.

But Ricki was terrible at one very important thing. Being a Wilde.

As the youngest member of an illustrious family dynasty—the Wildes of Wilde Funeral Homes Inc., the national chain founded in 1932—Ricki knew that her family thought she was an Unserious Person. Her only resemblance to the Wildes was her face, which was a carbon copy of those of her socialite sisters, Rashida, Regina, and Rae. (Each born a year apart, they were frequently referred to as Rashidaginarae.) But where her sisters were long-stemmed roses, Ricki, younger than Rae by fifteen years, was a dandelion. A bloom that *looked* like a flower but was really a weed: born to erupt into fluff, floating wherever the wind blew.

Tonight was the Wildes’ Sunday dinner. But it wasn’t

just dinner. It was her family's weekly business meeting. No husbands, kids, or tardiness permitted. Ricki parallel parked hastily at the foot of the driveway and flew

up the steps to the front door of her parents' Buckhead, Atlanta, estate. Hastily, she checked the time on her phone. She was four minutes early—a first! Usually, Ricki sprinted in as the first course was served, sputtering apologies. Her lateness was sometimes excused (I-75 traffic), but usually not (a risky one-night stand holding her hostage in a trailer). Either way, it was never forgotten.

Tonight, Ricki had to be on her best behavior. For once, she had important news to share. Life-changing, game-changing news.

Quickly, she checked her reflection in the glass inset in the door. She needed to feel powerful, true to herself, which translated into a '70s halter dress, '60s gold platforms, and '80s dolphin hoops, all thrifted from her favorite consignment shops. She fluffed her shoulder-length twist-out and smiled.

Perfect, she thought with ballsy defiance. *You are a strong, confident woman with a brilliant business plan and a bright future ahead. You are you, and you are enough.*

Upon further reflection, she removed her septum piercing.

And then, calling upon the posture she'd learned at Beauregard School of Etiquette (integrated by her mom, class of '68), Ricki straightened her shoulders and swept into the house.

The rest of the Wildes were already seated in the grand dining room, cocktailing and chatting.

"… but, Regina, no one gets caught for tax evasion anymore," her mother, Carole, was saying as Ricki rushed in. Ricki's father, Richard, paused mid-sip of wine to sigh at his youngest child. Her sisters' Botoxed brows, none of which had moved a millimeter in a decade, struggled to frown in disapproval.

Ricki slid into her chair. The table was elegantly plated for the first course, a light gazpacho prepared by James, her parents' longtime butler. Spiffy in a walnut-colored suit, James matched the dark wood and chintz upholstery of the dining room. He dutifully refreshed everyone's glass except for Carole's, as she chugged vodka neat from a

Hamilton tumbler that the whole city pretended contained water. Then Ricki greeted her family.

"Hi, Mom. Hi, Dad." Ricki smiled brightly at her parents and then nodded tersely in her sisters' direction. "T-Boz, Chilli, Left Eye."

Rashida shot daggers at her.

“What’d I miss, y’all?” asked Ricki, with more enthusiasm than she’d ever shown at Sunday dinner.

“Forget what you missed. Why are you dressed like every member of Sister Sledge?” asked Regina. Like Rashida and Rae, she wore crisp, colorless designer separates and a swingy silk press. The Rashidaginarae uniform.

“It’s obscene, wearing *used clothes* when everyone knows we have money,” scoffed Rae, who’d never forgiven Ricki for replacing her as the baby.

“Now, girls, don’t count coins at the table,” slurred Carole, diamonds twinkling at her earlobes. She was already toasted.

“She’s just so zany, Mother,” groaned Regina. “We all know these costumes are just a distraction from her exhausting personality.”

“I’m not zany,” said Ricki, stealing a roll from her mom’s plate. “I’m idiosyncratic.”

Her whole life, Ricki’s sisters had roasted her for being too flighty, too messy, too much—and she pretended not to care. But it secretly stung. It plagued her, the fear that her personality would test the patience of everyone she knew.

“Girls, let your sister be,” fussed Carole. Once extravagantly pretty, she now had the disoriented look of a prom queen stranded in the wilds of her midseventies with no ride home. “She looks like me, way back when. Though I never exposed my bosom. I always say, 'To look your best, don’t lead with breasts.’”

“I’ve never heard you say that,” said Regina.

“Well, you’re flat as paper,” said Carole, swirling the ice in her tumbler.

Richard Wilde Sr., an impeccably suited gentleman who was not a debauched megachurch pastor but looked like one, stayed silent. A millionaire CEO, TED Talk king, and *New York Times* bestselling author of the iconic business book *Till Death: Monetizing the Inevitable*, Richard talked for a living but was a man of few words at home. The less he gave, the hungrier his family was for his attention.

Especially his oldest daughters, who each owned several Wilde Funeral Homes franchises and were in competition to be the family's next greatest business mind.

Ricki did not own a franchise. She didn't own anything of her own. Yet.

“Back to business,” said Rashida. “As I was saying, I’m swamped this week. My designer and I have been finalizing the interiors of my new house. Massive undertaking…”

“Are you using Baylor Washington this time?” asked Regina.

“No one uses him after he did that *former reality star’s* rental.” Rashida’s voice lowered to a whisper. “Rhymes with BeBe Reakes.”

Carole yelped.

“Anyway,” Rashida continued, “despite being booked and busy, I just signed the contract on our first Pass Away Café!” She beamed proudly. “Now we can discuss final plans with grieving families over fruit tarts and cognac-spiked lattes.”

Ricki paused midbite. “The brunchification of death, Rashida? Really?”

Rashida tossed her hair. “It’ll be a nippy day in hell when I take business notes from a *receptionist* who barely graduated from a *state* school.”

“I’m not a receptionist, okay? My official title is director of first impressions.”

Technically, they were both correct. Ricki was the director of first impressions at Wilde Funeral Homes’ flagship property on Peachtree Street, and it was, indeed, a fancy synonym for “receptionist.” Suffice it to say, Ricki’s life hadn’t unfolded the way it was supposed to. Like her sisters, Ricki was meant to graduate with an Ivy League business degree, excel in an entry-level position at Wilde’s, work her way up to a customer-facing role, and finally, open her own franchise—at which point she’d be awarded a weighty trust fund. But from the moment of her accidental conception, Ricki had never followed the plan set out for her.

When it came to the Wilde Funeral Homes businesses, all Ricki ever cared about was one thing: the flowers. The bouquets, the branches, the petals. The fantastical sprays. Growing up, her one respite from the rigidity of the Wildes—and the chilly business of dying—was the wooded garden a mile or so beyond their estate. She’d bask languorously in

the crisp, dew- soaked grass, burying her fingers in the soil and dreaming of her own nonsensical, perfect world. She'd plant every seed she could find, coaxing life to spring from the earth. She'd trudge home, breathless, in pollen- dusted shortalls with dirt-encrusted fingernails and grass-strewn hair, and Carole, horrified, would escape to her bedroom suite and speed-dial her therapist.

Little Ricki had her head in the clouds, lost in fairy-tale scenarios so vivid that, till she was twelve years old, she'd whisper to herself in her imaginary friends' voices. This did not bode well for real friendships. And her dreaminess didn't translate into business success at Wilde Funeral Homes, either. Hence her career trajectory. The receptionist salary was abysmal, but it paid for her one-bedroom rental and used car. It was fine. Her life was small.

Ricki had acquaintances, but close friends? Nope. She was too scared to drop her guard. Dating was easy, though, due to her attraction to hot, shallow guys who weren't super concerned with who she was, beyond being a pretty Wilde. She'd even been engaged three times before coming to her senses and bolting.

Real intimacy—platonic, romantic, or sexual—paralyzed her. What if people saw what the Wildes saw? That she was a joke? Her family had mythologized her black sheep personality. But Ricki wanted to create her own mythology. To stand in her *own* truth, as self-help culture dictated. She'd always felt that her real life was unfolding somewhere else, far away. She did have an inkling of how to get there, though. Ricki had a dream, one that she'd been obsessing over since she was that dirt-dusted kid in the forest. And unlike most childhood dreams, this one hadn't faded into memory. It had stuck to her, growing and growing, and she'd been cultivating it at every turn. But she'd never breathed a word of it to her family. Wilde Funeral Homes was the planet around which they orbited. Choosing any other future was akin to sin.

"Ricki, it's your turn to share business news. We're waiting with bated breath," prodded Richard in his mellifluous baritone. Lost in thought, Ricki hadn't realized her sisters had already shared their updates. She was up next.

"Y'all know she doesn't have news," mocked Rashida. "Unless she's engaged again," tittered Regina.

“Remember the fiancé who photoshopped their faces on a stock engagement photo and sold it to the *Atlanta Journal-Constitution*?” asked Rae, giggling.

“Lord! Don’t speak of it,” sighed Carole, spilling a bit of vodka on her linen sheath. “I could barely show my face at the Orchestra Noir winter ball.”

Rashida snickered. “If only she was as dedicated to work as she was to humiliating us.”

Weary-eyed, Ricki sat silent, disassociating, as her sisters picked her apart, united in their perfection, their smug sameness. If living in this family had taught her anything, it was that compared to Rashidaginarae, she’d never measure up.

Tell them your plan. What you’ve prepared for. Set yourself free.

“I do have news,” she spit out, almost too loud.

Her sisters perked up, looking both suspicious and intrigued.

“What would you think if I… well…” She paused and restarted, adding more gravitas to her voice. “Okay, hear me out. I’d like to open my own shop. A… a flower shop.”

Her words hung in the air for one endless, excruciating moment. From his post against the back wall, James shook his head sadly and exited the room.

“Jesus, send the flood,” whispered Carole, polishing off her fourth vodka tumbler.

“I’ve always wanted a flower shop. My entire life.” And then the details spilled from Ricki like molten lava. “You guys don’t know this, but I create floral designs. It’s my passion! And I’m good. *Really* good. I actually run a floristry account on Instagram. I kept it secret from you, but… yeah, it has three hundred seventy-two thousand followers. I do a lot of brand partnerships,” she said with hesitant pride. “I made thousands off my last sponsorship with a brilliant cactus artisan.”

Perplexed, Richard looked at Carole. “The hell is a cactus artisan?”

“Ricki, are you on that stuff?” wailed Carole.

“I’m not on drugs, Mom,” sighed Ricki. “I raised enough money through partnerships to afford night school at Chattahoochee Tech. In May, I received a horticulture associate of applied science degree! And I did it while holding down three floral design apprenticeships.”

“Everything you just said sounds poor,” said Rashida.

“I just can’t picture you operating a business,” scoffed

Regina. “I’ve seen you crumble in Excel.”

“Think of the optics,” urged Rashida. “You really want to be the sister who failed out of the family business… to sell carnations? This pursuit is silly. We are not silly.”

Ricki snorted. “Sure, Pass Away Café.”

“Dare I ask,” started Richard, all controlled tension, “if you have a business plan?”

“I do!” And she did, but now she was losing confidence, fast. “Sort of? I guess before I shared it, I wanted to get your thoughts on the idea. Your approval.”

“Hold on,” blurted out Rae. “You’re a secret plant-fluencer? What’s your account?”

“It’s called Botany Flowers Lately.”

Rashida blinked. “That’s not a name—that’s a question.”

“It’s a *pun*,” answered Ricki. And then, because she’d had it up to here, she snapped. “And it’s a fucking good pun! Be happy I decided against 'I’m Sexy and I Grow It’!”

Incensed, she shot out of her chair. “You know what? Y’all have this rigid idea of what success looks like. Which is fine, but it’s not mine. I don’t want your life. And I’m not cut out for the funeral business. I feel like I’m trying to fit a circle in a square. I feel like I’m disappearing.”

“Why can I hear you at eleven decibels, then?” moaned Carole, gripping her forehead with a dainty hand. She stood up, swaying a tad. “How dare you spit in the face of everything Richard’s done to give us such privilege? I’m going to bed. May God cover you, Rae.”

“Ricki,” corrected Rae.

“Exactly,” she slurred nonsensically. And then James reappeared to escort her away.

“I’ve heard enough.” Rashida rose from her seat. “Ricki, you’ve officially lost it. Good luck, girlboss.”

Regina and Rae hopped up, spun on their heels, and followed Rashida out. Now it was just Ricki and her dad. Calmly, he took one last sip of his wine and faced his youngest daughter. The one he liked the best. His baby, who was supposed to be a boy and be named after him—Richard Wilde Jr.
—but, from the start, had refused to follow the path set out for her.

His baby, who, despite being a girl, was named Richard Wilde Jr. anyway because her mother had been fresh out of good female *R* names.

Wearily, he frowned in her direction. “Richard,” he started.
“Yes, Richard?”

“I always try to be patient with you. Because of your attention disordered… uh… deficit… disease.”

Ricki’s shoulders slumped.

“Thanks?” “Your sisters are tiresome bitches.” “I’ve *been* saying!”

“But they’re right. You’re not savvy enough to build a business. If you were? You would’ve pushed harder to open a funeral home franchise, only to receive your trust fund. Then you could’ve run off with enough capital to invest in five hundred flower shops.”

“I wanted to start with my own money,” she said quietly.

“Commendable.” His voice dripped with the sarcasm of a man who, at age twenty-four, had resuscitated his grandfather’s business with generous mob backing. (Allegedly.)

She continued, wiping her damp palms on her cotton dress. “I love you, Daddy. But I need to start fresh, create my own business, my way. Who knows? Maybe I’ve inherited some of your genius genes.”

Richard cocked his head at her. And then he nodded slowly, revealing the barest hint of a smile. Was it amusement? Incredulousness? Pride?

But then his warmth froze over, replaced by his usual chilly reserve. “You let things happen to you, Ricki. Too often and too late, you realize you’re in trouble. That’s a dangerous trait, in business and in life.” He frowned. “We’re not alike.”

“I might surprise you, Daddy,” she whispered, a knot forming in her throat.

“Perhaps.” Richard checked his watch. Conversation over. “I’ll accept this as your two weeks’ notice. After that, you’re on your own. Let’s see how much of me is in you.”

Then Richard Wilde Sr. walked out and left Richard Wilde Jr. alone.

A week and a half later, Ricki was in hell.

Her business plan was airtight, but she still hadn't found a shop location. In three days, she'd be unemployed. And every second working at the

Wilde Funeral Home felt like eternity. An architectural monstrosity, the neo-Mediterranean building boasted terraces, fountains, and a heroic number of cherub angels. It was the perfect place to memorialize your loved ones if you imagined the Great Beyond to be an opulent palace catty-corner to a Trader Joe's.

Her job was to welcome grieving families into the home and, while they waited for a caseworker, upsell them to hell by suggesting pricey add-ons to their funereal experience. Glam services before the funeral? A Gucci silk casket lining? A paid actor to perform histrionics if the deceased was too unpopular to draw a crowd? Wilde's had it all.

Obscene. Ricki had never had the stomach for draining clients of their finances in the name of capitalism. And now, with one foot out the door, she was even less inclined to do her job.

Ricki was slumped against a marbled archway at the entrance, chipping off her manicure. Damn-near catatonic with malaise, she barely noticed the woman in front of her.

"Oh!" She immediately straightened up. "Welcome to Wilde Funeral Home," she robotically recited, "your loved one's endless resting place of peaceful enchantment."

The person stepped out of the sun's glare. She was an elderly woman, dazzling in a linen caftan, oversized white-framed sunglasses, and a tiny silver 'fro. Her hands were trembly and twisted (arthritis, surely), and she was subtly stooped. But otherwise, she projected chic vitality.

"Hello, dear. I'm Della Bennett."

"Ricki Wilde, ma'am. It's a pleasure. How may I help you, Mrs.
Bennett?"

"Oh, call me Ms. Della. I only have a few minutes—my driver's parked yonder." Her voice had that clipped, almost British inflection adopted by upper-crust Southern Black women of a certain age to indicate class. Like Tina Turner and the first Aunt Viv.

She removed her shades, revealing sad, striking eyes surrounded by paper-thin, lined skin. A shadow of pain touched her features. "My husband, Dr. Eustace Bennett,

has passed.”

“My condolences, ma’am. I hope he went peacefully.” “Well, he went ironically.”

“Ma’am?”

“Dr. Bennett was a neurologist specializing in narcolepsy. He died in his sleep.” Bravely, she thrust her chin upward. “My husband always had a lively sense of humor.”

Ricki had seen her share of grieving spouses, from hysterical to elated. Ms. Della obviously loved her husband but wasn’t the type to broadcast her emotions.

“Would you like some tea in our Eternal Slumber Lounge?” If Ricki had truly been good at her job, she would’ve offered her a $125 facial in the Life Is for Living Spa Suite.

Ms. Della declined, saying that the love seat by the archway would do. Ricki took a seat next to the older woman. “Are you from Atlanta, ma’am?”

“Not originally, but Dr. Bennett was born here. We lived about twenty minutes down Route 75 until a few years ago, when I convinced him to buy up in Harlem. Ever been?”

“I have! We’d stop at Abyssinian Church on the drive up to the Vineyard every summer. I haven’t been since I was fourteen, when I was banned from summering with the family.” She grimaced. “But I love the Harlem Renaissance. Imagine living through that time. The style! The music! The *parties*.”

“You like to romanticize, I see?”

Ricki smiled. “Guilty. I romanticize everything.”

“Bless your heart.” She patted Ricki’s forearm with a light dismissiveness. “Why were you banned from Martha’s Vineyard?”

“Oh. An incident with my mom’s Porsche. Did you know that wild turkeys attack cars if they see their reflection in the windows?”

“You found out the hard way, I suppose.”

“No, actually I’d read about it in *National Geographic*, and then I drove into Vineyard Poultry Farm to test it out with local turkeys. They mangled the car door and waddled away without a scratch.” She sighed. “My psychiatrist diagnosed me as 'terminally curious.’”

“I declare!” Ms. Della pronounced it *Idy Claire*, like a

woman’s name, and then she let out a bell-like, twinkling chuckle.

“So,” started Ricki, “why did you move to Harlem?”

“Hmm. Where does one start?” It struck Ricki that Ms. Della might be the most refined, correct person she’d ever encountered. She wondered if

she'd ever had an improper moment. "It was my dream, I suppose. You see, I'm ninety-six, and…"

"Ninety-six? *You?*"

"Swim aerobics." She winked. "Anyway. In my day, women tucked away their own desires to support their husbands. I loved Dr. Bennett more than life, so I was happy to do so." She clasped her hands together. "He was my sweetheart. Do you have a sweetheart?"

"No, ma'am. I don't think I've ever had one."

"You will." She smiled. "To me, love is like listening to an album. Some people skip to their favorite songs and ignore the rest. Other people listen to the entire album over and over, until it's familiar and cherished and they know every note by heart. That's how Dr. Bennett and I loved each other. He was music I could listen to forever."

Ricki blinked at this stranger's striking face. She'd never experienced love like that, and she'd doubted it existed outside of urban legend. But the way Ms. Della put it, transformative love sounded actually attainable. She wondered if she'd ever find it for herself.

"Dr. Bennett sounds like a wonderful man," breathed Ricki, enchanted by the older woman. "I can't imagine how it must feel to love and lose a soulmate."

"The love doesn't stop just 'cause he's gone," Ms. Della said with careful practicality. "And to answer your earlier question, I'd always hoped to live in Harlem. After living most of my life following Dr. Bennett's lead, it was time for me to realize my own dream."

"It's like that Langston Hughes poem," said Ricki. "What happens to a dream deferred? Does it dry up like a raisin in the sun?"

Ricki worried her bottom lip with her teeth. The poem used to hang on the wall of her Sunday school classroom. To little Ricki, deferring a dream sounded like torture.

Ms. Della frowned at her, not unkindly. "What's troubling you, sugar? It looks like you've got the blues."

"Is it that obvious?"

"Well, I know from the blues, myself." She lowered her voice. "Turbulent moods run in my family, they say."

“Seriously? You seem so positive, so upbeat.”
“Lexapro,” she divulged. “But how about you? What’s wrong?”

Her gentle presence and precise, direct way of speaking were so soothing to Ricki. But older Black women always melted her. As Ricki was a late-in-life baby, her grandmothers and great-aunts had died before she was born, and she'd always longed for that connection. This woman made her want to spill all her feelings.

"My family owns this business. But it's not for me. What I'm good at, what I love, has no value here." She sighed miserably. "I'm a horticulturist."

Ms. Della's mouth dropped open. "A whore-to-*what*, now?" "No, I'm a HORTICULTURIST," she pronounced carefully. "Ah. My hearing. Go on."

"Flowers, greenery, plants. They're my life. I want to open my own flower shop. A magical, fragrant space. I want to surround myself with life, not death." She looked at Ms. Della shyly. "There's an abandoned shed in the woods, a few miles from my parents' house. It's my favorite place on Earth. It's so old that nature has taken over, with vines and bushes growing wild. I want a shop like that, where the outside converges with the inside. An urban oasis."

"Sounds real nice, like Eden." Ms. Della's eyes softened, and a silent kinship settled between the two of them. It was the first time Ricki had heard anything other than ridicule over her idea. It was thrilling, sharing an instant understanding with a stranger. It felt like relief.

"I've been saving half my paycheck for this for years! But the spaces I can afford to rent are all wrong. Too industrial, too modern." She looked down at her hands. "I just have one chance to prove myself. No one believes in me, and I constantly second-guess myself, but I know I can make this shop a success. You know how some things just make sense?"

"Hmm," said Ms. Della cryptically. Then she pulled a photograph out of her wallet and passed it to Ricki. "Don't know if you're looking to leave the state. But this is my brownstone in Harlem. I live on the top three floors, and there's a boarded-up ground-floor apartment that's been empty since the 1920s. Lord knows I don't know what to do

with it.

“Now, this may sound funny, Ricki. But the apartment feels like it’s holding its breath. Just waiting for the right person to bring it back to life. Wouldn’t it make a pretty flower shop?”

Ricki peered down at the photo. Instantly, she felt a physical pull. An

insistent tingle in her chest. Heart thudding, she opened her mouth to speak, but Ms. Della had moved on.

"Now. Shall we discuss old Dr. Bennett's homegoing?"

Later, Ricki couldn't recall how she had answered. She just remembered knowing, with certainty, that she'd randomly met her real-life fairy godmother and that she'd felt as dazed and dazzled as if she'd been touched by a magic wand.

Much later still, she'd realize that there was nothing random about it at all.

CHAPTER 2

NIGHT-BLOOMING JASMINE

September 2023–February 2024

In early September, Ricki moved in. It was one of those golden New York afternoons when summer overstayed its welcome. Sunshine trickled through the tree-lined streets, dappling sidewalks and illuminating the city in warmth. The day felt enchanted, and Ricki was home.

225½ West 137th Street. Harlem.

Even the address sounds enchanted, she thought, peering up at Ms. Della's brownstone for the first time in person.

She'd done her research, and she knew that Ms. Della's house was near Strivers' Row, the swanky historic district where Black aristocrats had lived during the Harlem Renaissance. But nothing had prepared her for this breathtaking block of impossibly grand nineteenth-century Italianate brownstones. Just as Ms. Della's photo suggested, number 225½ was a beautifully restored antique, framed by leafy vines and vibrant wildflowers. To Ricki, a lifelong lover of bygone eras, the entire building felt like a gift delivered through time. Magical.

Ms. Della lived on the top three floors. But on the ground level, to the left of a majestic stoop, was the unoccupied, boarded-up garden apartment. Inside, the large front room with a massive street-facing bay window would house

Ricki’s shop. And the small studio apartment in the back would be her home. She hadn’t intentionally manifested this faraway place to hold

her new life, but damned if *this* wasn't *that*.

Before Ms. Della and Dr. Bennett bought the house a few years ago, no one had lived there since 1928. Immediately, they'd had it structurally updated to modern standards, and because Ms. Della loathed clutter, she'd tossed most of the 1920s relics belonging to the last tenants. ("Nostalgia and melancholia are fraternal twins," Ms. Della had announced to a horrified Ricki.) Thankfully, in the empty garden apartment, Ms. Della had left a few pieces of original furniture covered in muslin, thinking that the person who finally rented the space might like some historic flair.

Holding her breath in anticipation, Ricki opened the creaky front door to the spacious front room. The parquet floors were sagging, the plaster was chipped, and the air was fragrant with sawdust, Lysol, and Febreze, but oh, it was charming. Ricki pulled a dusty piece of muslin off the wall, revealing a rusted pier mirror reflecting sunlight into the space.

She wandered around the room, designing the space in her head. When she got to the windowsill, she peered outside onto 137th Street, imagining what it must've been like back when Harlem was the epicenter of Jazz Age glamour. Flappers shimmying in satin, men in spats and hats. The fast, frenzied craze of the Roaring '20s. The Black mecca!

Not so much today. So far, Ricki had spotted only chic upper-middle- class white families hanging out outside, with UPPAbaby strollers and toddlers. It was the kind of block where Black Lives Matter flags waved from every stoop, but only a few Black lives resided.

Because Ricki was wired to go superhard for anything she cared about, she'd spent the past three months educating herself on Harlem culture. She reread Nella Larsen, Ralph Ellison, and Amiri Baraka. She streamed *Moon over Harlem* (1939), *Hell up in Harlem* (1973), and *A Rage in Harlem* (1991). She read Pat Cleveland's memoir and bought Van Der Zee prints. She already knew Mase's *Harlem World* album by heart, but nevertheless, she streamed it forty-seven times as she packed up her

apartment.

Just then, Ricki noticed a note card on the windowsill. DELLA BENNETT was embossed on top in gold, and the note was written in spidery handwriting.

Dear Ricki,

This place was waiting for you. Work your magic. Two conditions upon living here. 1) Pay rent in a timely fashion. 2) Visit your elderly landlady upstairs once a week, for tea and The Great British Bake Off. I hear she's recently widowed and would enjoy company.

xx DB

Hugging the note to her chest, Ricki spun around, eager to see the rest. In the back of the soon-to-be shop was a door leading to a narrow hallway with a closet-sized bathroom replete with a 1910s-era claw-foot tub. The hall ended with a compact studio apartment featuring a sliver of an oven, a few cabinets, and a sink tucked in a far corner.

The aging floors groaned as she raced around, swiping muslin off furniture, dust catching in the sunbeams streaming through the window. Gasping with delight, she discovered a throne-like dulled-green wingback armchair.

Most spectacularly, she uncovered an antique oak piano and bench. She'd never seen a square piano before. It was so quaint and old-fashioned looking, like a set piece from *Lady Sings the Blues*. She slid onto the bench, running her fingers down the well-worn, nicked planes of the oak and then across the ivory keys. With flourish, Ricki did a dramatic roll down the entire keyboard.

There's such faded glamour in this piano, she mused. *Who played it?*

Whose lives were lived here?

No time to wonder. Ricki had work to do.

After selling her car and three engagement rings—and emptying the savings she'd earned from her brand partnerships—Ricki could afford to cover living and business expenses for six months. Only. Refusing to spend a dime on renovation help, she stripped the floors till her fingers bled. She borrowed a neighbor's ladder to paint dreamy designs on the ceiling and then toppled from the third step, spraining her ankle. With bandaged fingers, she

refurbished that ancient emerald throne into an Instagrammable set piece and, with a pronounced limp, dragged it from her studio to the shop. She awoke at 5:00 a.m. daily, taking the A to the Chelsea Flower District, filling crates with stock she'd use to practice her whimsical designs, ones she'd reproduce in a few months, for actual clients.

The work was fucking grueling. But she'd never had more fun in her life.

Ricki's grand opening was set for December 1. She had a little over two months to transform the space into an *experience*, a maximalist fantasy blooming with unexpected treasures. And a fantastic name was key! Sadly, Ricki couldn't trademark Botany Flowers Lately (apparently one couldn't "own" a question). Her alternate name was even better: Wilde Things.

Drowning in HGTV-level renovations, Ricki realized she hadn't had a moment to be a proper flaneuse, which was one of her favorite words. It was such a romantic idea, meandering through the city, taking in new sights and sounds while people-watching, solo-dining, and bookstore-browsing with abandon. (Ricki decided that a flaneuse should project adventurous glamour, which translated into a luxe oversized marigold shawl belted over 1950s men's trousers—all sourced at neighborhood stoop sales.)

One windy afternoon, after visiting all the touristy spots—Red Rooster, Sylvia's, the Schomburg, the Apollo—Ricki was perched on a barstool at Lenox Coffee. She was delighted with her solo adventure; she felt warm and satisfied, an independent and self-sufficient business owner. While she was sipping a cortado and studying her receipts from the past week, a peal of laughter erupted from a nearby table. Bright-eyed and cool, the group of twenty-somethings was huddled over a phone, giggling. The sound was infectious, and she smiled, too. Then she stopped.

Wait, why am I smiling? she thought, feeling the beginning, panicked pangs of loneliness. *I'm not in on their joke. And those aren't my friends. Besides Ms. Della, I don't know anyone here! I'm all alone in the most expensive city in the world, where I've decided to open a flower shop on a sleepy residential block where the nearest commercial*

establishment is a restaurant. Did I think about the fact that I'd be sharing foot traffic with a joint called Sexy Taco? No. Will the same person ordering mezcal and burritos want to buy my frou-frou floral arrangements? PROBABLY NOT. I've already failed at one career, and if I fail at this, I'll be a confirmed

loser. No home, no money, no family, no pride. And yeah. No friends, either.

Had her family been right about her all along? They always expected her to flail, to fail. But despite them, Ricki had never felt like a loser. She simply felt misplaced. Like a duck raised by squirrels. She'd always suspected that given the chance to do what she did best, she'd succeed.

But right now, Ricki was sure of only one thing. She was lonely. Her Wilde Things woes might be easier to swallow if she had friends. In theory, she'd kill to be a part of that coffee shop friend group. But in actuality, the idea of chitchatting her way into a meaningful friendship felt… impossible. Making friends was difficult for Ricki. Her old introverted instincts told her to fold in on herself and, in lieu of actually speaking to other humans, dream up scenarios in the shower where she and some chick would accidentally grab each other's orders at a cute smoothie spot, and POOF: instant best friend origin story. It was easier than attempting conversation and then watching someone's polite dismay as they realized her packaging didn't match her personality.

Ricki's prettiness was mainstream, unchallenging. She had a sweetly approachable smile and sparkly doe eyes. People expected her to be palatable. Not a woman with paralyzing social anxiety around anyone she hadn't known for twenty years. A woman who told weird dad jokes when nervous. A woman who, while grasping for appropriate cocktail party chatter, might stress-babble about the latest nightmare fish discovered in the Mariana Trench. Or the Great Molasses Flood of 1919. Or the top five reasons Mark Zuckerberg should be tried for crimes against humanity.

Out of fear of being rejected or embarrassed, she'd always kept people at arm's length. And it only hurt Ricki in the end. Did people really think she was a goofy disaster, or were her sisters' voices in her head psyching her out? Either way, it was clearly time to Get Out There.

When she read on Twitter about a networking event for local Black creatives, Ricki jumped on it. So on the evening of November 3, she strode into the Edge, a rustic Jamaican

British restaurant on Edgecombe, ready to be social. The vibe was sexy. Afro beats and codfish fritters. A quick study of HELLO MY NAME IS stickers revealed senior directors of this and directors of that. At almost thirty, Ricki was just starting her dream career, but these partygoers had been corporate players for years!

Ricki was wilting. Why did everyone seem to know how to schmooze, be social, be normal, be cool, except for her? Was no one else paralyzed at the thought of unleashing the car crash of their personality on an innocent stranger? Her self-consciousness was a prison.

So she downed two Moscow mules in rapid succession. She shut her eyes and chanted her anxiety app affirmation (*I am not in danger, I'm uncomfortable, this will pass, and I am confident*). Then she practically threw herself at a friendly-looking woman wearing palazzo pants. Her tag said, LYONNE: SOCIAL MEDIA DIRECTOR, DANCE THEATRE OF HARLEM.

"Not to be awkward," Ricki shouted awkwardly over the thumping bass, "but what's your perfume? It's… so pretty."

"Sorry, can't hear! What'd you say?" Stomach sinking, Ricki repeated herself.

"It's actually an essential-oil-infused cocoa butter," said Lyonne. "My boyfriend makes it. I can get you some."

"Really? Thank you." And then Ricki self-immolated. "I love cocoa butter. My skin's so dry I identify as an Eczema American."

Lyonne gasped. "You're Mexican American?" "What? No, I…"

"I just saw a TikTok about this community of Black Mexicans descended from escaped enslaved people. You have a fascinating culture. Come on, diaspora!"

In too deep, Ricki just nodded, cheeks aflame.

"Gr-gracias?" she croaked, her soul leaving her body. "Ummm… I think I'm tipsy. I should go. Great meeting you."

She raced out of the party, aghast.

But then three miracles happened in rapid succession.

The first miracle was Ali. After her fourth injury (a hammer-bruised thumb), Ricki decided she needed a handyman. Enter Ali, a TaskRabbit hire who built shelves

and installed an in-store workspace in forty-five minutes. On the app, he was highly rated for his workmanship.

The reviews failed to mention that he was hung like a horse.

One night, he climbed off the ladder, and Ricki passed him a beer. As he stood there, downing a Heineken while resembling a low-res Jesse Williams, Ricki perked up.

Seducing some guy was infinitely easier than making friends. There was no guesswork, especially because it was always a version of the same man. She was attracted to hot guys who, in lieu of having an established career, purported to be "collectors of experiences." Great kissers with shady living situations. Men who never tried to dig deep into who she was, but instead just happily ate up the easy, sexually agreeable version she showed them.

Ali, in a nutshell. After the beer, they christened the IKEA bed he'd just assembled.

The sex wasn't earth shattering, and Ali's conversation topics were limited to (a) crystals and (b) conspiracy theories (like the one suggesting that Ted Cruz was, in fact, Rob Kardashian). But he was kind. And an artist! He'd painted a few portraits of Ricki, and they were lovely.

She didn't know much else about him, which was what she thought she wanted.

But deep down, Ms. Della's words reverberated through her. *He was music I could listen to forever.* She wondered how it would feel to intensely connect with someone. A man who was custom-made to be yours. But then she caught herself. It sounded too rare, the kind of thing that happened to a lucky few. And so she buried the thought and snoozed through another "Moon Landing—World's Greatest Hoax!!!" video with Ali.

The second miracle came in the form of a disgraced former child star. One afternoon, Ricki was rolling out wallpaper when her shop door flew open.

"Hide me!" yelped a lightly freckled woman with a sleek, low bun. Intentionally anonymous looking in clean makeup,

a yoga set, and a puffer, she could've been any Harlem Hot Girl. Except that she wasn't.

"Holy shit, you're…"

"Yeah, yeah, yeah. Help me!"

“Bathroom!” Ricki blurted out, pointing toward the hallway.

Tuesday Rowe raced past her, down the hall. *The* Tuesday Rowe. The TV star who would’ve been a movie star—if her career hadn’t been cut short when she was twenty and she accused her Hollywood agent of sexual harassment. Instead, the biracial beauty was fired from the *TGIF* sitcom she’d starred in since she was seven. *Ready Freddy* was about a hunky white widower who grief-adopts five multicultural kids, all of whom possess tremendous vocal range and form a pop group. When the show began, Tuesday’s character was the Feisty Black Girl with the One-Liners. But as she grew into a gorgeous teen, it morphed into the Flirty Black Girl with the Pregnancy Scares. Today, the twenty-nine-year-old was living anonymously and comfortably off syndication residuals while struggling to write her memoir, *See You Next Tuesday*.

Ricki rushed to the window and spotted three middle-aged men ambling down 137th Street, waving their phones.

“They’re gone,” Ricki called out, her heart thundering with adrenaline.

In a flash, Tuesday joined her at the window to see for herself.

“You saved me.” Tuesday was out of breath, but she sounded exactly like the sitcom version of herself that Ricki had grown up hearing. “Whew! Good looking out, sis.”

“Of course. Anytime.”

Tuesday flashed Ricki her megawatt smile. Ricki smiled back, and the two gave each other a pound. A conspiratorial energy sparked between them.

“I’m Ricki. Um, Ricki Wilde.”

“Fuck yeah, you are. Iconic name.” Tuesday smoothed her hair and sighed grandly. “Ugh. Those mouth-breathing dorks chased me all the way from Sexy Taco.”

Ricki’s eyebrows rose. Sexy Taco might bring her foot traffic, after all. “Such an invasion of privacy,” she said.

“And creepy. Does that happen a lot?”

“With guys, yeah. I gave them their first hard-on, so they

think I belong to them. But who really knows why? The male psyche is too twisted to be any of my business."

Ricki remembered when nineteen-year-old Tuesday famously told reporters that she didn't "really believe in men, as a concept or genre." That

was after her brief marriage to an allegedly closeted NBA star, a union that gossip bloggers swore was orchestrated by her crooked manager.

Tuesday took a cursory glance around the space, spotted the emerald throne, and gasped. She walked to the center of the room and did a slow spin. “This place is dope.” She looked Ricki up and down. “*You’re* dope. Cute jumpsuit.”

“You like it?” Ricki beamed. The encounter had happened so fast, her signature social anxiety hadn’t had a chance to show itself. “I made it from a secondhand muumuu. Thrifting and sewing are my self-care.”

“Mmm. A sustainable queen.” She squinted at her. “Where’d you come from?”

Tuesday asked this question imperiously, even though she’d been the one to burst into Ricki’s shop. Ricki gave her the abridged version of her life story while Tuesday explored the shop’s jungly decor. Finally, she stopped at a bowl of tiny crystals.

“Pretty, right? Take one,” offered Ricki. “My boyfriend, well, my not- boyfriend… my *handyman* gave them to me. Supposedly, they restore calm.”

“We’ve all had a handyman, girl.” Tuesday plucked one out of the bowl, popped it into her mouth, and gulped. Ricki screamed.

“They’re crystals, not pills! You’re supposed to put them in your bra or whatever!”

Tuesday, who’d thought it was an oddly shaped Xanax, said, “I don’t wear bras.”

Stunned, Ricki burst into laughter. Tuesday giggled even harder. And from that moment on, they were partners in crime. The absurdity of Tuesday’s crystal snafu made Ricki feel safe enough to be herself. And for Tuesday, the fact that Ricki never sold the crystal story to gossip blogs meant she was a “real one” (badly burned by former friends, the actress had a low bar for relationships). Nothing seals tighter than best friends who’ve never had one.

The third miracle was the month of December. When Wilde Things held its grand opening on the first, it was an instant hit. Sure, some of it was due to the festive season. But at a time when flower trends were minimalist, Ricki's shop was an over-the-top winter wonderland! Think Christmas cactus and candy-cane-striped amaryllis; Kwanzaa bouquets with tropical red, black, and green blooms; and Hanukkah wreaths mixing blue poppies with white orchids.

By New Year's Day, she'd earned double her projection. And by the end of January, she'd lost every cent.

People just… stopped coming. Ricki couldn't figure it out. In December, she could barely keep blooms in stock, the orders were so fast and furious. What did she do wrong?

"I know what you did wrong," offered Tuesday one evening after closing. Foot traffic had been brutally slow that day. Now she and Ricki were stirring bowls of recycled, plantable paper infused with wildflower seeds. Ricki wanted to package the homemade paper into chic note card sets, offering them as a last-minute purchase at the register. If she ever had any more sales.

"Those weekly January promotions," continued Tuesday. "They were too esoteric to resonate with consumers."

Ali, who was crouched in a corner, repairing an exposed nail, stopped working long enough to look up "esoteric" and "resonate" on his phone. No one was more surprised than Ricki that they were still dating. It was a thrice-weekly hookup thing, but his sweet, uncomplicated presence was calming.

"But the themes were so punny!" exclaimed Ricki, fighting back tears. "Seize the Daisy? Hibiscus and Gravy? No one even tried my homemade gift-with-purchase biscuits."

"I love your biscuits." Ali made grabby hands at Ricki, grinning at his euphemism. And then he added, "But in keeping with my radical honesty practice, I should say your *actual* biscuits were mad dry. Did you use Crisco?"

Ricki stopped stirring the paper, her shoulders slumped

in misery.

“I offended you!” Ali hopped up and slipped an arm around Ricki’s waist. “I can’t believe I said something so dumb.”

“No?” Tuesday cocked a brow. “Ten minutes ago, you asked me if I paid

Illuminati fees in blood.” “And you didn’t answer.”

“Please stop watching hoax YouTube, Ali. I beg of you. Read a book.” “Only sheep value books. A book is just a collection of some random individual’s thoughts…”

“But you are some random individual.”

“And I vibe off my *own* thoughts. My *own* interior work. My *own* journey towards living with energetic intention.”

Tuesday groaned. “Ricki, your man’s Jada Pinkett Smith-ing again.”

Ricki was too lost in rising worry over Wilde Things to even register this exchange. She needed to get outside, touch some grass. Back at home, when life got too hectic, escaping to the forest behind her parents’ house gave her instant serenity. That was what she needed.

“Hey, is there a garden nearby? Something small, maybe? I need some nature.”

Born in Harlem, Tuesday knew its contours by heart. “There’s a cute community garden over on 145th.”

“But it’s dark out,” protested Ali. “I’ll go with you for protection.”

Ricki smiled. “In this ’hood? Protection from who, ad execs and finance bros?”

Handing her spoon to Ricki, Tuesday said, “They’re the scariest thugs of all.”

It was chilly, but in a fresh, invigorating way. And Ricki was weatherproofed in her earmuffs and teddy coat. She walked ten blocks. At the entrance was an ornate wooden sign painted in childlike rainbow- colored letters: 145TH STREET COMMUNITY GARDEN.

Beyond the ornamental gate, there were perennial flowers, herbs, berries, fruit trees, and a small goldfish pond. Ricki followed a brick walking path through the foliage, to the center of the garden. She knelt down, taking

a few deep, restorative breaths. Closing her eyes, she dug her fingers into the earth, the heart of everything. And it worked the way it always did.

You got this, she thought, feeling calmer. *Get gritty. Get scrappy. But don't give up.*

As she perched on the ground, something on a small teak platform glinted and caught her eye. Brushing the dirt off her hands, she walked over to investigate. It was a plaque.

THE SITE OF EDEN LOUNGE CABARET

1927–1929

STAR-STUDDED NIGHTS, WORLD-CLASS MUSIC, ERA- DEFINING STYLE.

THE PARTY ENDED TOO SOON WHEN AN ELECTRICAL FIRE DESTROYED THE NIGHTCLUB, INFORMALLY MARKING AN END TO THE HARLEM RENAISSANCE ERA—WHEN BLACK BRILLIANCE CAPTIVATED THE WORLD.

Ricki read the last line out loud. She thought about being Black in the ’20s, facing unfathomable obstacles and still flexing on the world. If Josephine Baker could go from being a thirteen-year-old divorcée eating out of Saint Louis garbage cans to a Broadway superstar in five years, why was Ricki crying? Her biggest problems were that she bruised easily and lacked closet space.

And that was when she noticed the undeniable fragrance: the sweet, heady vanilla almond of night-blooming jasmine. It wafted over her, carried on a chilly breeze. *Sigh.* It was her favorite scent. She’d recognize it anywhere. Ricki followed the walkway to a lush bed of jasmine where the delicate white and yellow flowers were crawling up a garden wall.

Transfixed by the nocturnal blooms, she almost didn’t register the feeling of being watched. But then it hit her. She spun around and gasped, clapping a palm to her mouth.

A figure stood in the shadows.

He was tall and powerfully built. Chunky shearling coat, charcoal jeans. His features were cut from granite, with an impossible jawline and a stern, commanding brow, but then

there was the sensual surprise of his mouth. It gave his chiseled masculinity a vulnerable, lush softness. The effect was mesmerizing.

Jesus Christ, he's beautiful, she thought, unabashedly staring. *He'd be beautiful in any era, anytime, anywhere.*

Then Ricki caught the blazing intensity in his expression. She froze. It was something beyond surprise, beyond shock.

The man looked terrified.

Ricki felt a punch of emotion in her chest almost knocking her off her feet. This moment was important. She didn't know why, but it *was*. She didn't know him, but she *did*. The hairs on her arms prickled, and every cell in her body jolted to attention. Her brain went haywire with images too vague to grasp. She was reeling. All the secret places she hid herself felt exposed. She stood before this man, this glorious stranger, and felt utterly naked. Laid fucking bare.

A thrilling, throbbing sense of inevitability surged through her, and then she realized she felt as terrified as he looked.

He must've felt it, too.

But before she could ask, he was gone. As swiftly as if he'd never been there at all.

And Ricki was left standing alone in the garden, clutching her pounding heart.

Thoroughly thunderstruck, she realized only later that the mystery man wasn't the only reason she'd left the garden feeling so unsettled. The scent of night-blooming jasmine made no sense. The plant flowered only from July to October. And it was winter.

February 1.

CHAPTER 3

CAROLINA SHOUT

February 1–2, 1923

February 1! The month of love, cuz. And we gon' get you some tonight," announced Sonny, strolling down Lenox Avenue a few steps in front of his slightly dazed cousin Breeze. Sonny was the king of bold proclamations— every thought and feeling this man had was emphatic—and so Breeze took his announcements with a grain of salt. Besides, he wasn't thinking about love. At least not with a person.

Breeze was in the early stages of a lifelong love affair, one that, after he'd spent a mere twenty-four hours in town, had seized him in its clutches and refused to let go.

Harlem.

It was the New World. And at twenty-three, the same age as the young century, Ezra "Breeze" Walker III (or IV?) had already put a lifetime between Fallon, South Carolina, and his future. Breeze had stepped off the train yesterday morning, boarded the subway to 135th and Lenox, and headed straight to the Harlem YMCA. There, he'd slept for exactly one hour before wandering around, gobsmacked, until after dark.

He'd thought he knew what to expect. Sonny had been mailing him copies of the *Amsterdam News*, *Negro World*, and the *Crisis* for the past year. So Breeze knew that

Harlem was the Sepia Paradise. But he wasn’t ready for the dizzying intoxication of the city. Honking streetcars,

glistening pavement, ritzy estates. Unfamiliar Caribbean accents announcing the sale of fruits he'd never heard of. Glamour girls gossiping in rapid-fire slang he couldn't follow. Big-shot intellectuals huddled together behind café windows, plotting God knew what. A new play? A revolution? Whatever they were up to, it felt larger than life. Even the dope peddlers, whispering high-priced lures from corners, seethed with style.

And all this shit was Black. In every incarnation. Ebony, honey, pancake pale, short, fat, tall. Doctors, bandleaders, attorneys, chorus girls, clergymen, debutantes, poets: all afire with a showy swagger that would've bought trouble anywhere else. Here, in this enclave of citified habitués, the old rules were dead, and Black wasn't wrong. Black was right.

Breeze knew in his bones that he was supposed to be here, in this cosmopolitan land of plenty. Everything up to this point felt like a lie.

"Tonight," continued Sonny, "I'm taking you to a juice joint." "What, they got special juice over there?"

Sonny slapped his palm across his forehead. A full head shorter than Breeze, with frenetic Chihuahua energy, Sonny was sharp in spats, a wool suit, and a panama hat. Breeze may have gotten all the good looks and height in the family, but Sonny had flash.

"Breeze! A juice joint is a speak. A speakeasy."

"I know what a speakeasy is. Don't talk at me like I don't know nothing."

"You don't. We need to review a few things before tonight. I'll give you a quick education so you don't sound like a neophyte."

"Neophyte? I'll neophyte you right here." Breeze had a sixth-grade education. But he read everything he got his hands on. He was delighted by words.

"Would you rather I call you a Russian?" Breeze frowned. "A what?"

Chuckling, Sonny took a drag from his cigarette. "A

Russian is a Negro just arrived from down south. You know, ’cause you was *rushin’ to git up nawth*.”

“So you, a year ago,” snarked Breeze. Then he froze, apple in mouth.

Three girls swept past him in a haze of rich brown skin, expensive perfume, and confidence. They looked like they’d stepped out of a picture show, wearing satin heels and cloche hats with marcel-waved bobs. One

turned her head and winked at him. The other two giggled and kept sauntering down the sidewalk, making puddles out of every man in their wake.

Breeze was aware he was gawking. He couldn't help it; he'd never seen Black women dressed so finely. He'd never seen *white* women dressed so finely.

Sonny grabbed him by the elbow and shook him out of his daze. "When I was a Russian, at least I had the sense not to stroll down Lenox in work pants and a collarless shirt, looking like a sharecropper," whisper-yelled Sonny.

Breeze *was* a sharecropper. His whole family was. He was born in Fallon, South Carolina, a dusty wretched town, to a long line of men named Ezra Walker. (His first son would be named Ezra, too. No clue why. It was a tradition, and most traditions didn't make sense.)

He'd been a quiet baby in a family of musically inclined juggernauts. Big Ezra, his harmonica-playing dad, had traveled with a vaudeville troupe as a kid. Breeze's mom, Hazel, had taught ukulele, and his sister Minnie's alto had brought the congregation to weeping. So when Breeze was born, folks waited for the day he'd reveal his musicality. But he had none. He didn't sing, hum, or even talk for years. He just listened to the world, with his little brow furrowed. Then, on his third birthday, he ran up to the piano after service and, with his daddy's heartbreaking grin, banged out "Down in the River to Pray" with a pitch-perfect ear and astonishingly adult emotion. The toddler had range! Like he'd been at it forever. Cool as a fan, smooth as a breeze.

When the applause died down, he peered out at the congregation and spoke his first word, a question. "More?"

After this, the congregation somehow pooled their money together to buy Breeze a secondhand nineteenth-century piano with missing keys and shredded wires. By five, he could play anything: ragtime, boogie-woogie, hymns, field songs. By seven, he was playing at services all over Fallon County. By thirteen, he'd learned a few life lessons: banging keys for the Lord got you the prettiest girls; gigging in the jook joints got you fast cash; and

playing brothels when your God-fearing parents thought you were working as a night watchman at a textile mill—well, that gave you a better education than you'd get at a shitty country schoolhouse.

Breeze escaped in 1917, when he was drafted to the all-Negro Ninety- Third Infantry Division and stationed in France during World War I. It was brutal business, but better than home, because he was valued, and under the command of the French troops, his unit was spared the senseless, exhausting rage of white American men drunk on a racial lie they'd invented. It had never occurred to him that white people weren't the same everywhere.

France was Breeze's first taste of freedom. He savored it, excelling in combat, leading his infantry band, and even introducing awestruck Frenchies to wild piano in gin-soaked dives.

And when it all ended, Breeze returned home a decorated soldier. It was June 1919, and he was a changed man. He hoped America had changed, too. Later, the papers would call this season the Red Summer. All over the country, white mobs unleashed horrific violence on Colored communities, proving a point to uppity soldiers who dared hope for equity.

One day, Breeze made the near-fatal mistake of saying "thank you" to a white shopkeeper in a tone that, apparently, "suggested superiority." The shopkeeper and his sons strangled him to blackout. He regained consciousness some hours later, facedown in a barren field, outside town.

There'd be no hero's welcome.

The next day was Sunday. Reverend Green had planned a special service for the returning military men. Breeze was struggling; his breathing was labored, his ears ringing and throat ablaze. Hazel was worried. She insisted her son stay put while the family represented him at First Baptist. On the way out, she kissed his fevered forehead. Minnie punched his shoulder and, trying to make him laugh, whispered, "I know you ain't feelin' poorly—you just skippin' services to call on Ida-Prue Freedman." Big Ezra, with a quietly furious furrow to his brow, stood in the doorway and gave his son a military salute.

Breeze never saw them again.

The Klan torched the church, lynching the entire

congregation. Men, women, children. No one survived, save for Sonny, who, soon after, fled north with his right arm still raw to the shoulder. But Breeze stayed, despite his cousin's pleas. He stayed and shattered into a million pieces that couldn't be put back together.

He deserved to stay in that hellscape, haunted by the ghosts of the

family he couldn't save. He deserved to remain in that shack, where the straw mattress on the floor served as a constant reminder that he'd been fucking *napping* while his family burned to death. Breeze's penance was to usher in the grief and let it destroy him.

It should've been me. The thought rang in his head every second as he returned to the fields. He stopped talking, and he stopped playing music. For four lost years, Breeze listened to life go by as he picked cotton, the sack weighty on his back. And when his back gave out, he'd crawl, picking two rows at a time, back and forth. He listened as he primed tobacco, the sticky, itchy goo dying his hands purple. He listened, closely and critically, as he hoed the fields—and in the mornings, he'd wake to his restless hands tapping out a rhythm on his chest.

Whenever he had time, he read the Colored newspapers Sonny sent him in the post. The headlines told of a glittering, hopeful world that was completely alien to Breeze, of blinding lights, fast nights, and music. He felt an insistent tug, a pull. Harlem was beckoning.

In the papers, he learned that four legendary jazz pianists lived there: James P. Johnson, Fats Waller, Willie "the Lion" Smith, and some kid named Duke Ellington, who was not, in fact, royalty. They were *it*. (Especially Johnson, who was currently composing a surefire hit called "The Charleston.") They played a new kind of jazz called stride, and it washed over Harlem like a gin baptism. On Friday nights, at secret locations, they hosted "piano cutting contests," where Johnson would play his battle song, the hard-as-hell-to-master "Carolina Shout," and challenge every pianist in the house to try it himself. If the pianist was good? He got instant respect that led to gigs, recordings, fame. If he was booed? Time to hightail it back to Tuscaloosa.

One day, Breeze received an oversized parcel in the post. Sonny had sent him the "Carolina Shout" record. He sprinted four miles to church and played it on the creaky phonograph, and in one listen, his entire world sharpened into focus. His piano-playing drought was over.

Late at night, exhausted from the fields, he'd sit at his secondhand piano and teach himself to play the tune. In no time, he could replicate James Johnson's recording. But as he conjured the notes over and over, imprinting them on his brain, Breeze sensed a newer sound just beyond his fingertips, one he couldn't grasp yet. And he knew that in Fallon, he never would.

When he decided he was good enough, Breeze booked a one-way ticket to New York City, wearing the clothes on his back. Nothing was keeping him in Fallon, an unholy hellscape that smote everyone he loved from the earth, carving out his insides and leaving him hollow. On the train ride out of town, he stared out the window as the dusty landscape got smaller and smaller, every passing minute putting more distance between himself and the plantation he'd worked and lived on his whole life. The plantation run by the people who'd owned his ancestors. The plantation where Big Ezra, Hazel, and Minnie Walker had, despite odds that had nothing to do with them, made a loving home. Shutting his eyes, he sent his family a silent promise to make them proud, to make the Walker name immortal.

In Manhattan, Breeze wasn't sure of anything. Where would he live? Could he keep chickens there? Which subway would take him to the meatpacking job Sonny had fixed for him? He barely even understood northern accents (he'd actually departed the train in New Jersey, because the train announcer's "Newark" sounded like *New York*). The city might swallow him whole, but first, he had one piece of business. To find tonight's piano cutting contest and play the hell out of "Carolina Shout."

The only truth Breeze Walker held was that he was a great jazz pianist. When he played, for those few minutes, his broken world slotted back together, like a jigsaw puzzle. But his confidence was unearned. Tonight, he wanted to prove it.

"You listening?" Sonny snapped his discolored, burn-scarred fingers in front of Breeze's face. "Keep walking—we're almost at the suit shop. We're hitting the town tonight; you gotta look spiffy. Never know who you'll see at the cabarets. Somebody's plumber, Zora Hurston, my dentist, Mae West, Louis Armstrong, the dame who hawks collards on 143rd, all in the same joint!" Sonny plucked a rose from a bouquet outside of a deli, handed it to a swanky-looking lady, and hollered behind his shoulder, "Put it on my tab, James!"

Prohibition was currently keeping Sonny employed as a

bagman. His job was to slip cops bags of cash in exchange for allowing liquor to lubricate the finer establishments in town. He and Breeze were raised the same way, living in identical tin-roof shacks with no electricity, running water, heat, or shoes. For Breeze, Sonny's cosmopolitan persona was brand new, and it was both amusing and annoying.

“Does Mae West know that when you first moved up here, you tried to turn off an electric light by blowing on it?”

“You lie like a no-legged dog,” protested Sonny, looking around to make sure no one overheard. “I regret writing you all those letters.”

Sonny paused to tip his hat to a white cop and shake his hand. They clearly worked together. Breeze ducked his head instinctively, careful not to meet the cop’s eyes.

“We don’t gotta do that here, cuz,” said Sonny, throwing his arm around Breeze’s shoulders as they made their way through the crowd. “These fays ain’t like the ones back home. They wanna be like us!”

Breeze chuckled. “I was born at night, but not last night.”

“I ain’t lyin’,” insisted Sonny, suddenly serious. “Leave that *yessuh massa* shit at home. Ain’t no place in America for a humble Negro.”

Just then, Sonny stopped in front of a lavish storefront. *Mr. Stein’s Fine Suiting and Haberdashery, Est. 1892* was etched onto the window in gold calligraphy. A stout man exited the front door, wearing the cleanest suit Breeze had ever seen.

“Sonny! These suits are fifteen dollars. I can’t afford this—my job don’t even start till Monday.”

“It’s on me. Listen, two things can be true at once. Are you a looker? Yes. Are you currently dressed like a ragamuffin? Yes. Ain’t nobody gonna take you seriously as a musician or otherwise looking like Uncle Remus. Allow me to gussy you up.”

Breeze allowed it and swore to pay Sonny back. He knew he stuck out. At the very least, he should *look* like he fit in. He was drunk on the promise of New York City. He wanted it all.

Sonny and Breeze made their way down 133rd between Seventh and Lenox Avenues: Swing Street or Jungle Alley, depending on who you asked. It was 3:00 a.m., and well-heeled flappers, playboys, celebs, and townies spilled from

taxis, buzzing and up for anything.

Sonny discovered the whereabouts of the piano cutting contest. The Nest! Hidden in the basement of a barbecue spot, it was a dive where any itch could be scratched (whether you liked boys, girls, both, or in the extremely specific case of one Atlantic City gangster, a store mannequin

named Mama). Plus, the hooch was pure, and on Thursdays, the sequined chanteuse belting out Ma Rainey's songs at the piano was, in fact, Ma Rainey.

Breeze followed Sonny down to a barred basement door. His cousin muttered a secret code to the gargantuan doorman behind the bars: "One- Nut Charlie dies at dusk." With a nod, the doorman led them into bedlam.

Inside, Breeze was hit with sound. The room was small but feral. Frenzied music raged, the floor shaking as revelers danced the foop and jig- jag. At cocktail tables, politicians mingled with sooty-eyed socialites too saddity to stomp. Breeze didn't recognize the piano player, but he was accompanying *the* Bessie Smith as she belted out her upcoming single, "'Tain't Nobody's Biz-ness If I Do." A hulking bartender poured bathtub gin into the mouths of two jazz babies in drop-waist satin. Giggling, they tongue-kissed and toppled onto a senator's table, legs akimbo.

"Underwear's optional here, I see," remarked Breeze. Realizing he was staring, he averted his eyes. He wondered if he'd ever get used to the sights and sounds of Manhattan. Maybe he was too weary. Dragging around that old, familiar grief muffled the feel of the city's fizzy electricity. He was just a bystander.

I just need to play, he thought. *Sonny found peace through partying; I'll find it playing.*

"That's Lo and Behold, the cabaret act," said Sonny. "Okay, a few rules before we part ways. First rule: don't look surprised if something outrageous happens."

"Define 'outrageous,'" said Breeze, watching Behold crawl across the senator's table and crouch over a wine bottle, picking it up sans hands.

"You'll know when you see it. Here." Sonny grabbed a tin of toothpicks from his suit pocket and handed it to Breeze. "Chew on a toothpick. It'll give you something to do so folks don't know you're thinking bumpkin thoughts."

"Maaaan, I'm up in the same room as Bessie Smith," he said, almost to himself. "Bessie Smith! You believe that?"

"See? That was a bumpkin thought. Second rule: *don't look impressed by famous people*. Or anything. Never be

impressed. Third rule: don’t get drunk. ’Cause you gotta play the fuck outta 'Carolina Shout.’”

With that, Sonny disappeared into the crowd, and Breeze was alone. At a

party straight out of the moving pictures. Dressed like he was, too, in a striped suit, spats, and oxfords. Earlier that night, he'd glimpsed himself in a cab window and had to blink twice. The only trace of the old Breeze was his face—and his hands, still stained from priming tobacco.

I was in the fields just two days ago, he reminded himself, and then he tried to stuff those memories somewhere deep, deep inside. He took in the spectacle of the room, marveling at a scene he'd never expected to see with his own eyes. It was 1923, he was twenty-three years old, and his brand- new Harlem life began now. He refused to be tied to the past.

Eagle-eyed, Breeze scanned the cocktail tables. He saw actress Fredi Washington emitting twinkling laughter with Louis Armstrong. And A'Lelia Walker, heiress to the Madam C. J. Walker fortune, puffing cigars with three young men wearing rouge. Then he froze.

James Johnson, Fats Waller, Willie the Lion, and Duke were seated up front, cigarette smoke swirling above them. Breeze closed his eyes, marveling that he was breathing the same air as his idols. For a moment, he was still. Grateful.

Then Breeze heard the crowd roar. His eyes flew open. In a matter of seconds, all hell had broken loose. Twelve showgirls wearing feathered lingerie, feathered anklets, and beaked, feathered headdresses rushed through the crowd toward the dance floor. The whole place started chanting, *"Where do the birds go every night? To the nest! To the nest!"*

The ladies made a show of looking for a victim to pull onto the floor. Before Breeze could move, he was illuminated by an amber spotlight on the dance floor. In a flash, multiple birds circled him, writhing and undulating in a dirty shimmy.

Laughing, Sonny bellowed from his table, "Go easy on my cousin! He's a freshman!"

Lo wiggled up behind Sonny, resting her chin on his shoulder. "Breeze's gonna be a star," he bragged to the showgirl. "Just watch." "Oh, I'm watchin', all right. I

think I’m in love.”

“Nah, I know what you love,” he said. Discreetly, he pulled a tiny bag out of his suit pocket. She slipped him fifty cents and disappeared into the writhing masses.

On the dance floor, the performance had finally ended. The birds peppered Breeze’s cheeks with kisses, then pushed him off the floor.

Embarrassed but ever polite, he tipped his hat to the closest dancer. “You make a beautiful chicken, ma’am,” he drawled. “CHICKEN?” she hollered, insulted. *“I’m a cockatiel!”*

The dancer stormed off, feathers flying. Breeze couldn’t win. Of all the things he’d hoped would happen tonight, getting molested by a flock of tropical birds was not one of them. And in front of his heroes?

God, can they just call the contest? he thought. He couldn’t get distracted now; he had too much riding on this moment.

As if reading his mind, Bessie Smith tossed back her sherry and addressed the crowd. “Fellas! Take your mittens off your kittens and listen. Up next is the piano cutting contest. All you outta-town ivory-ticklers, step up for a chance at glory.”

A handful of hopeful pianists lined up, and one by one, they played with various levels of expertise while everyone else pummeled the dance floor with fevered gaiety.

They weren’t Breeze, though. Fingers tingling, brain swirling, he knew what they didn’t know. This contest was his to win.

“Who next?” called out James Johnson.

It was time. Chewing his toothpick, Breeze approached the piano with trembling hands.

“It’s the bird bait,” said James Johnson. “What’s your name, fella?” “Breeze Walker, sir.” *Breeze Walkuh, suh.*

“Show us what you got, kid.”

This was his moment. His whole life, Breeze had been dying to play for real musicians, to impress them, be noticed, be heard. To prove that his hunch about his talent was right.

Breeze’s first thought when he sat down at the piano was that it was unlike any he’d ever played on. The wood felt silky and expensive. His second thought? *Time to take my competition to school.*

And then he jumped in, hitting the first few notes. They were a little jangly as he got used to the instrument, but

after the first bar, he was swinging. His melody was technically perfect; he played the whole song to searingly flawless perfection. Later, Sonny would tell him that if you closed your eyes, you'd think it was James Johnson himself. When Breeze was done, wrapping up "Carolina Shout" with an elegiac, rousing crescendo, he looked up triumphantly. And then he realized the crowd was silent.

“This ain’t no school recital!” exclaimed James Johnson to loud laughs from the audience. “Don’t play it like me. Play it like you! We ain’t impressed by copycats or perfection, boss. Duke turned down a scholarship to Pratt.”

Breeze blinked at Duke. They were both twenty-three, but the superstar was light-years away in terms of sophistication. “You turned down a scholarship?”

Duke, the epitome of cool, puffed his cigarette. “Ain’t need it.”

“If you can’t swing,” said James, “best hop off the ride, Breeze. Or, judgin’ from the way you’re freezing up right now, maybe I should call you…?” He cupped his hand around his ear and leaned into the crowd.

Everyone roared, “FREEZE!” Riled up, the crowd started to boo. Even the sexy birds were waving him away from the piano.

Crushed, Breeze stood up from the bench. Was he delusional? Why had he thought he could pull this off? Every pianist that had sat down before him was polished. He could tell from the posture of their hands. Breeze was self-taught, a hack.

But that’s exactly right, he thought. *If I can play exactly like the composer, with no formal training, I can do anything. How would it sound if I played like myself?*

“Can I try again, sir?” he asked. With raised eyebrows, James nodded.

Breeze sat back down. And the sounds came to him. The whoosh of the train, snippets of standards that prostitutes had hummed to him, whirring crickets, the tears, the endless hurt, work songs, the fucking South, the unceasing poverty, his calloused bare feet trekking over gravel, his sister’s shimmering alto, his dad’s harmonica, his mom’s ukelele, the groan of his cabin in high wind, the creak in his field-broken back. The explosive bursts and sudden quiet of combat. It all swirled in his head, brewing the suggestion of a new sound, a syncopated rhythm he couldn’t quite grasp, just beyond his still-tobacco-stained fingertips.

Breeze played “Carolina Shout,” all right. Cool as a fan, smooth as a breeze. But he unleashed a torrent of feeling

all over it. It was everything he couldn’t say, couldn’t talk about, and was too emotionally obliterated to feel. He played and played, head down, not hearing the crowd, not caring, just pounding out the beat of his heart. He went left when he should’ve gone right, replaced a G chord with a B. It sounded like the instinctual

ecstasy of you and your girl reaching for each other midsleep, barely conscious, not thinking, just *feeling*. Ezra "Breeze" Walker played "Carolina Shout" like it was a torch song. It was jazz, but the blues, too. Rhythm and blues.

And when he was done, his tears glistened on the keys. And again, there was silence. But that was okay. It wasn't the audience's job to understand a sound the first time they heard it. Then Fats's cigarette toppled out of his open mouth and into his scotch, sizzling. James, the Lion, and Duke began to clap. Then the whole place exploded.

Breeze grinned and uttered one word. "More?"

CHAPTER 4

MYSTERIOUS BENEFACTOR

February 3, 2024

Ricki was standing at her Wilde Things workstation on the heels of the slowest day at the shop thus far. Aside from the delivery guy from Sexy Taco (it'd become her favorite restaurant), no one had rung the buzzer all day. After consulting her budgeting software, she realized that her problem was money. She was spending lavish amounts on the most exotic, precious breeds. Her designs were breathtaking—the kind that had garnered her a massive IG following—but in real life, this "quality over everything" approach was going to bankrupt her.

I need to budget more wisely, she thought, tucking a fancy bougainvillea stem into a wreath. *I need to stop… stop…*

Stop thinking about him. I need to stop thinking about him.

With a frustrated groan, she squeezed her eyes shut and shook her head. Garden Gentleman's face kept popping into her brain. Rudely and unexpectedly. He was a six-foot-two-inch (ish?) intrusive thought.

It was just a random encounter. Just two people startling each other in the dark. So why did her stomach drop fifteen floors every time she thought of him?

Stop, thought Ricki. *You're already dating a perfectly*

nice person. Yes, Ali thought the vice president's name was Caramel Harris. But no one's perfect, least of all you.

“… so, what time should we go?”

Ricki shook her head, coming back to reality. Ali was sitting on the emerald throne, scrolling through his phone.

“Sorry, I zoned out. Where are we going?”

“Sweet Colette bakery is hosting that community art party tonight. I’m one of the featured artists? I get to show three pieces.”

“Oh, right!”

“Yeah, you know, 2024 is all about making profits off this art. It’s time to acquire my own domicile. Energetically speaking, my roommates are cool. But living with a throuple is not gucci.” He fished around in his pocket. “The fuck are my abundance crystals?”

“Which three paintings will you show? The portraits of me, maybe?” Jokily, Ricki batted her lashes.

“You’re so distracted with work, my queen. Remember, I told you the owner used one of my Ricki portraits for the social media invite? And today, he printed it out and stuck flyers around the neighborhood, old- school style. Your face is all over Harlem.”

Ricki had been so focused on the shop, nothing besides her latest orchid delivery had penetrated her consciousness.

“I really need to get out more,” she said, rubbing her bleary eyes. “So, you’re showing one of my portraits. What are the other two?”

“My spirit hasn’t led me to that answer yet. I might show pieces from the New School class I started last week.” He winked. “It’ll be a surprise.”

The evening of February 3, there was a frost in the air, but the sky was crystalline blue, cloudless. Socially speaking, a party was exactly what Ricki needed. Once she’d recovered from the mistaken-nationality moment at that networking event, she’d decided to introduce herself to one person a day. The smoothie specialist at her favorite juice bar. The owner of the West African spot where she ate dinner weekly. The clerk at her favorite bookstore who knew her

penchant for Eva Mercy’s vampire erotica novels. And after every connection she made, she felt more at home.

An hour into the party, Sweet Colette was thrumming with feel-good vibes. Folks were shoulder-dancing to midtempo bops and helping themselves to sugary cake pops and dry martinis. Ricki was feeling cute in

a 1940s lace blouse and a clingy slip skirt. Plus, tonight, she was winning the anxiety battle. She'd bravely introduced herself to Glenroy St. Jermaine, owner of Sweet Colette and fledgling artist, and they were having a delightful conversation.

"So, we'll be unveiling the art in like thirty minutes. Wait till you see my painting. The subject is an abstract oversized bird," said Glenroy, a lanky dude in a gauzy kimono and Adidas. "Oil on canvas. Hazy, almost holographic strokes."

"It sounds surreal," gasped Ricki. "Like you saw the bird in a dream."

"I did see the bird in a dream! How'd you know?" Glenroy shoved her shoulder playfully. "We're twin flames. You get me, my good sis."

"I always do." She'd known him for only seven minutes.

"Anyway, to make the body, I painted my ass cheeks and then smashed them on the canvas. It was gonna be a crab, but when I started the detail work, it turned into a bird."

Don't do it, thought Ricki. *Don't tell him your crab anecdote; don't self- destruct…*

"Hey, did you know that nature has evolved five different non-crab animals into crabs over history? Apparently, it's the perfect form. Studies suggest we'll all be shaped like crabs one day. Crazy, right?"

He stared at her, then died laughing. "I think you need a drink, Bill Nye."

Shaking his head, he disappeared into the crowd. Slowly, Ricki backed up against the wall. Grasping her martini for dear life, she tried to breathe through her mortification. She was, in fact, a fool. There was no scenario where that fun fact would be appropriate, except for, perhaps, a convention of 2012 Science Tumblr addicts.

Exasperated, she squeezed her eyes shut. And, like clockwork, Garden Gentleman's face blanketed her brain. She was losing her mind.

When she opened her eyes, there was Tuesday, wielding a cookie in one hand and—because she was three years sober—a Shirley Temple in the other. As usual, she was

trying her best to fly undercover as an anonymous baddie: joggers, chunky sneakers, slick bun.

"You came!"

"Of course I came. Free baked goods were involved." She batted her eyelashes. "Notice anything about my complexion?"

Ricki appraised her skin. “Excuse me, you’re radiant.”

“My new writer’s block obsession is skincare. I just spent all day ordering luxury Korean skincare online. I wanna look poreless and heavily filtered. Like a sensual cyborg.” She licked frosting off her finger. “Ugh, I’m never gonna finish my memoir. *To jest okropne*.”

It was startling, hearing Tuesday drop a foreign phrase. “You said what, now?”

“*To jest okropne*. It means 'this is terrible’ in Polish.” “You never fail to surprise, babe.”

“My mom’s Polish! She moved here at eighteen and became a coat check girl at the Roxy, where she met my dad, an aspiring backpack rapper from Houston. They fell in ’90s hip-hop love, had me, and then he got deported for running a fraudulent phone sex service where he’d pretend to be several lusty women. Turns out, he wasn’t Texan; he was a Rwandan refugee and a master at accents.” Sullenly, she chomped her cupcake. “I hate memoir writing. It’s impossible to tell what’s interesting about my life.”

Ricki laughed. “*That’s* interesting. That’s your origin story. You get your acting talent from your dad, who, given the opportunity, might have an Oscar by now.”

Tuesday beamed. “You’re smart as hell. Can you write my book? I’m useless. Speaking of useless… where’s Ali? Somewhere realigning his chakras?”

“I was just about to bring him up.” Ricki lowered her voice. “I need advice.”

“Kill him.”

“What?”

“What?”

“Tuesday.”

“Look, I stay ready to tussle. Holler if we need to key cars.”

Given Tuesday had won a three-way club brawl with Selena Gomez and a *High School Musical* extra that made *In Touch Weekly* covers in 2008, Ricki believed her.

“I always run from relationships,” continued Ricki. “And I need to rebrand. Should I try to turn this fling into a…

thing?”

“I’m all about breaking toxic patterns. But for Ali? What do you really

know about him? Do you ever even stay at his place?" "No. But only because he lives with a throuple."

Tuesday put her hands in prayer pose, fingertips at her forehead. "Biiitch."

"I know, I know."

"Does Ali make you feel adored? Do you feel held, physically, mentally, and astrologically? If not, dump him. Not because it's your usual pattern, but because you should."

Ricki chewed her lip, reluctant to admit that she agreed. Just then, they were interrupted by a perky blonde in a maxidress.

"Are you Tuesday Rowe? I used to love you. Why don't you work anymore?"

In the short time Ricki had known Tuesday, she'd experienced this way too often. It took only one person to spot her before the news spread like wildfire. To maintain her sanity, Tuesday always answered the "where have you been" question with preposterous sarcasm.

"What've you been doing since *Ready Freddy*?" said the woman. "Pursuing my dream of aquarium design."

"Legend!" The blonde bopped away.

Ricki handed Tuesday her uneaten fudge cupcake. "Here, you need this."

"Tuesday Rowe?" yelped another guest. "I'm such a fan! What're you up to these days?"

"Bathing in the blood of my enemies."

"Slay, villain," he said, and breezed past them.

Tuesday slid on her sunnies (at 8:00 p.m., indoors). "Love you, girl, but there's a complexion-boosting vitamin C mask waiting for me at home."

"I get it. But first, look at Ali over there by the cake pop stand. Is he my future?"

Tuesday peered in Ali's direction, frowning. "He looks blank. Like he's waiting for a soaring violin score to tell him how to feel."

Ricki grimaced. "Nothing there, huh?"

Tuesday air-kissed her in response and was on her way out when Chaka Khan's banger "Ain't Nobody" began thumping through speakers. Gasping, she turned back toward Ricki.

"Funny story—I met Chaka Khan's keyboardist at the Grammys. He

said he got the riff after hearing some dude play it at a piano store in Vegas. But he couldn't remember his name. When Chaka asked him who it was, he said, 'Ain't nobody.' Ha!" Her eyes sparkled. "Seems dope, actually. To be so influential on art but anonymous? No one projecting shit onto you. No one making up lies, feeling ownership over you, deciding if you're pure or a whore before *you* even know. But it's different for men. The culture crucifies girls." She sighed. "Fame is a prison."

Ricki shot her a gentle smile. "Your first chapter starts there."

As Tuesday exited, Ali headed over to Ricki, slipping his arm around her waist. He smelled of sawdust and patchouli.

Pro: his cologne is masculine and sexy, she thought. She smiled. "You're having fun?"

"Indeed! I'm lifted by all these positive energy frequencies."

Con: he speaks like a silent-retreat leader.

"Everybody here's good people. In fact, I was just vibing with this Columbia econ major? He dropped some wisdom I'd like to share with you, in the spirit of radical honesty."

"Oh really? Well…"

"He said your bouquets are too expensive."

Ricki planted her fists on her hips. How dare he discuss her business with a stranger? And how dare the stranger be right? She was tired of people telling her how to handle her store. Couldn't she learn a valuable lesson in peace?

"I work with rare, very expensive breeds," she said defensively. "I realize that I won't make a profit soon, but I'd like to come out even, at least. To do that, I have to price up."

Ali squeezed her hand. "Release yourself from the shackles of consumerism, my queen."

Ricki's patience was thinning. "But… I literally sell things for a living." Just in time, they were joined by Ms. Della, a vision in a cream caftan, oversized red glasses, and a sculptural fascinator. She'd

been chatting with her various neighborhood fans. As always, she carried a teacup.

It fascinated Ricki that she went out in the world with an actual cup of tea. Not a travel mug or a to-go tumbler. And it was her good china, as if

she were entertaining guests in her parlor. It had the same chaotic confidence of a kid traipsing into first period with no backpack.

"Ms. Della!" Ricki hugged her narrow frame, taking in her scent: Fashion Fair powder, Estée Lauder's Beautiful, and the Tiger Balm she massaged on her arthritic fingers.

Unconsciously, Ricki straightened her posture. Something in Ms. Della's presence always made Ricki want to please her. And to delete every ounce of flightiness from her personality. Not only was the woman elegance personified, but she also seemed to operate on a higher level than everyone else.

"Ali, I'll be right back. I promised Ms. Della we'd grab a doughnut together," she said, linking arms with the older woman.

She needed a break from Ali.

As they walked, Ms. Della whispered, "They said this was a party.

Where are the hats?"

"Fancy hats are a lost art, I fear,"

sympathized Ricki. "Your face looks off.

Something ailing you?"

"Just worried about Wilde Things, as usual. I can't wait for the day I can afford to create the fanciful, luxury arrangements I'm dying to make."

"No use waiting for an ideal scenario. There's only now," she said pointedly. "Close your eyes. Are you satisfied in this moment?"

Ricki did as she was told, allowing the sounds of laughter-infused party chatter to fill her ears. Her shop was in danger. Her rent was suddenly feeling unsustainable. Her future with Ali was bleak…

Who is Garden Gentleman? Will I see him again? Do I want to?

Get that beautiful stranger out of your mind, thought Ricki, clenching her fists. *Stop being a pain in your own ass.*

Quickly, she refocused her attention on Ms.

Della. And lied. "You know what? I am

satisfied, I think."

"Then you're doing everything right," she said definitively. "Oh, there's Soraya. She's a featured artist. You should meet her before the unveiling. She's a card."

Ms. Della led her to where her friend Soraya was holding court. A third- grade teacher by trade, Soraya self-identified as a Marxist vegan.

"Great to meet you, sis." Soraya blanketed Ricki in her calm, podcast- perfect voice. "I was just explaining my piece. It's a photograph of

bananas."

"I'm allergic to bananas," confessed Ms. Della, sipping her tea.

"But hidden within the photograph I added one *painted* banana. It resembles the rest, but it's just a bit… off. I'm exploring the things we do and don't notice in life. For instance, would you notice if someone didn't cast a shadow? Or had wings tucked into their coat? Would you see the painted banana if I hadn't pointed it out?"

Ricki nodded, intrigued. She wondered how much of the world she really took in. Sometimes, she'd get so fixated on one thing—gardening, reading—that she'd forget she was even a person until spoken to. Like, *Oh! I exist.*

"I created it as a reminder to open my eyes to the world," continued Soraya. "You never know who or what walks with us."

An icy chill ran down Ricki's back, the hairs on her arms standing on end. And then she had the distinct feeling of being watched. Her head swiveled toward the windows, and she surveyed the crowd. Nothing.

Ricki had to pull it together. The encounter with Garden Gentleman had clearly scrambled her brain.

"No doubt I'll notice the banana," said Ali, who'd joined the group. "By nature, I'm perceptive to all dimensions of experience."

"He's an empath," explained Ricki, cringing down to her toenails. "It's a gift." Ali linked his fingers with Ricki's. "God is so intricate."

"Y'all are together?" Surprised, Soraya looked from Ali to Ricki. "Ali, I'm in your portrait class at the New School. You don't recognize me?"

"Word? My apologies." Ali dropped Ricki's hand. "I didn't recognize you with braids."

"But you would've noticed the banana?" Ms. Della was sharper than she had any right to be at ninety-six.

Ali had no response, and Soraya filled up the dead air with effusive praise. "Ricki, I was always jealous of Ali's talent in class. Painting from live subjects is hard." And then she leaned over and whispered into Ricki's ear, "FYI,

I’m polyamorous, too.”

“But… I’m not polyamorous,” said Ricki. She eyed Ali, who was shifting his weight between each foot.

“Now, what does that word mean, exactly?” asked Ms. Della.

“It’s when you enjoy several relationships at the same time, ma’am,”

Soraya said.

Ms. Della cocked her head. “I declare. Well, no sin in being hot in the pants.”

And then, in that blunt way of elders who’ve decided their time would be better spent elsewhere, she squeezed Ricki’s shoulder and went off to find her driver.

Just then, Glenroy St. Jermaine clinked a wineglass with his massive cocktail ring. “Good people! Thanks for coming out to Community Art Night. As an aspiring legendary painter, I’m so inspired by all the artists here tonight. And now, without further ado, I invite y’all to unveil. And then sell your pieces like the rent’s due, y’all. ’Cause it is.” He cackled.

Clearly relieved to exit the polyamory conversation, Ali rushed over to his artwork. The three canvases were propped on a shelf, facing inward. Eyes bright, he turned each one around. And then everyone on his side of the room let out a gasp.

Ricki’s was the loudest.

There was one portrait of her. It was a lovely, uncontroversial nude, soft, pretty, and prim. The other two nudes were not prim, nor did they feature Ricki. Instead, the subject was a Kelly Rowland look-alike with sinuous braids. In one painting, she exposed full boobs and bush. The other was from the perspective of someone extremely close, looking down at her perfect naked body tangled in sheets. These pieces were dripping with sex.

In a rush, guests crowded the wall, taking iPhone pics and jockeying to be the first to buy one. Someone actually elbowed Ricki, trying to get a closer look at the braided bombshell. Both of those paintings sold immediately. No one even noticed Ricki’s portrait.

Abandoning her brilliant banana piece for a moment, Soraya made her way to Ricki. “I didn’t mean to overstep. It’s just that Kiana, the model in the portraits… We painted her, live, in class. And they had a vibe. It’s clear Ali started sleeping with her. You deserve the truth.”

“I appreciate that,” said Ricki, and she did. She stormed over to Ali, dragging him by the biceps to a back corner of

the bakery. And she snapped.

"I know we weren't exclusive, but what happened to quote-unquote radical honesty? *This* is how I find out you're sleeping with someone else?"

"My queen, she was just my model! We didn't sleep together."

“Tell another lie.”

“Okay, I only bedded her a few times. But it was in pursuit of art! Picasso was married and he had a muse. I didn’t want to tell you ’cause I knew you’d trip.”

“Oh my God, not you comparing yourself to Picasso. Who was a raging misogynist, by the way.” Ricki dropped her face into her hands and began mumbling to herself. “Did I really try turning Ali into a real relationship? I need therapy. And I can’t even afford therapy!”

“Wow. Okay. I see you’re mad. I receive it. But I know you find other niggas attractive. Stand in your truth. Don’t be a hippocrip.”

Ricki glared at him. “A *hypocrite*, you sentient Buddha statue from Urban Outfitters.”

She stormed away, furious at herself. The fact that she’d even considered being serious with Ali was proof that her dating instincts were trash.

Ricki made a decision. It was time to take a man break. Guys had never brought her anything but trouble, but the common denominator was *her*. She couldn’t be trusted to pick the right ones. She was wasting her own time!

Exasperated, Ricki grabbed her coat and headed for the front door. She was so lost in thought that when she felt a tap on her shoulders, she yelped with surprise.

In front of her was a small woman, barely five feet tall, probably in her late fifties. She was rocking a shag haircut with frosted streaks, a floral tunic, and teal eye shadow. She didn’t look like a Manhattanite. She looked like a cul-de-sac grandma from Scranton.

“Oh!” exclaimed Ricki. “Sorry, you scared me. Do… do I know you?” “No,” she responded in an assertive voice with a vague Latin European

lilt. Portuguese, maybe? Spanish? “I need that painting. That one. The one of you.”

Ricki frowned at the woman pointing at her portrait. Odd. No one had even remarked on the painting, and now this latecomer was demanding it? “Are you sure?”

“I repeat, I need that painting of you. Now.” The woman took Ricki’s right hand and pressed a roll of cash into her

palm. “That totals five thousand dollars. Would that be enough?”

Mouth agape, Ricki gawked at the stack with all the subtlety of a Fantasia ballad.

"I… I'm not the painter." She quickly scanned the crowd for Ali but couldn't see him. "Also, it's not worth this much! The sale price is one hundred fifty dollars."

"Price is no object."

"Well… I mean, I don't understand, but sure? I'll make sure the painter gets the cash. But wait, why do you want that one? What's the urgency?"

"I am not at liberty to say." The woman stared into Ricki's face for a beat too long, and something simmered beneath her expression. "You are as lovely as I thought you would be." The woman spoke quickly, shaking her head. "Trouble."

What the hell was she talking about? And why was she being so cryptic?

The woman looked like she was in a hurry to leave. "Who are you?"

"I am unimportant," huffed the lady. "In fact, you will forget me in a month or so. The painting is for my boss. As his assistant, I am simply following orders. May I?"

The woman strode past Ricki and hoisted the canvas off the shelf. "Wait, I really need to know who you are!" insisted Ricki, following her.

"My boss is a philanthropist who enjoys supporting young artists. No more, no less. As I said, you will forget me in a month."

She speaks so formally, thought Ricki. *No contractions. "I am" instead of "I'm." "You will" instead of "you'll." Who talks like that?*

"Can you give me their contact info? IG handle? Anything? Just to know who the artist should thank, at least."

The woman was heading for the door, the rubber soles of her Uggs squeaking on the floor. "Apologies, but no."

"Wait!" called Ricki as the woman left the shop and hurried away. "Stop!"

It was a freezing February night, and the first errant flakes of a snowstorm were starting to fall. The woman was

halfway down the block by the time Ricki reached her.

"Just give me a number! Anything!" she said. "Please!"

Annoyed, the woman spun around and made an impatient sound. She chewed her fingernails, paced, and looked extremely conflicted. Ricki gawked, trying to rationalize all the unsettling, surreal encounters

happening to her. First Garden Gentleman, and now her?

"Damn it," the woman muttered. She paused and then looked deflated, as if giving in. "212-555-5787. Happy now?" And then, canvas in tow, she rushed down the street and around the corner, lost to the night.

Ricki repeated 212-555-5787, 212-555-5787, 212-555-5787, 212-555-5787 over and over until she found her phone in her purse. She added it to her contacts under the name Mysterious Benefactor.

CHAPTER 5

YOUR VIBE ATTRACTS YOUR TRIBE

February 4, 2024

Della's teatimes with Ricki were sacred. And she appreciated that her de facto granddaughter deferred to her schedule, which wasn't the most convenient for a new shop owner. It was the highlight of Della's week: chatting with Ricki while sipping the latest blend from her True Serenity Tea subscription box as *The Great British Bake Off* played softly in the background.

In just a short while, Ricki had become far more than a tenant to her. She was family. Della treated her with a warm, overprotective, bossy spirit and, like any A-plus grandmother, always stocked a sensible pocketbook with Werther's caramels and Life Savers, which were Ricki's favorites. Though, Della's idea of "sensible" was 1950s Pierre Cardin. Della had no children or grandchildren, and Ricki had never had a living grandmother—until now.

They weren't blood related, but when it came to kindred spirits, there were no hard and fast rules about how they were delivered into your life. Sometimes your tenant became your granddaughter, and it was a gift, and that was that.

Ricki added so much vitality to her days. Of course,

Della’s life was pretty damned charmed, anyway. Before her beloved Dr. Bennett passed, he’d ensured that she’d be as comfortable as possible. He’d installed an elevator so she wouldn’t have to deal with stairs, hired a weekly

housekeeper, and arranged a grocery delivery service for her. To manage her lifelong bouts of the blues, he'd made sure he'd scheduled a weekly call with her Atlanta therapist and arranged for CVS to auto-deliver her antidepressants.

Due in part to all these provisions, Della enjoyed a deliciously active life. There was the aforementioned swim aerobics, but she was also treasurer of her Links walking club and took Zumba Gold on Sunday mornings before church. Even as she entertained Ricki from her living room couch, Della was doing light biceps curls with three-pound weights.

"It was surreal, Ms. Della," said Ricki, taking her usual place on the amethyst-colored wing chair. Della had decorated her triplex with eclectic pieces: zebra and mahogany woods, mirrored finishes, and jewel-toned everything.

"Certainly sounds it," responded Della, resplendent in her at-home look, flowy silk pajamas and her signature oversized geometric specs. "Dr. Bennett and I went to a wedding in London once. I couldn't get the hang of driving on the opposite side of the road. Turns the world all cattywampus. Also, the traffic signs are nonsensical."

"Such a good word, 'cattywampus'…" Ricki was barely hiding her distracted, fidgety energy, and Della wondered how long it would take her to address what was bothering her.

"Drink your tea, sugar."

Obediently, Ricki took a huge gulp and burned her mouth. "Sorry, ma'am, I think I'll skip the tea today. My stomach's in knots."

And then Ricki launched into a breathless recount of everything that had transpired at the Sweet Colette party after Della left. To be honest, the tale was a bit hard for Della to follow. Which part had sent Ricki into such a tizzy?

"So, a woman bought Ali's painting for an exorbitant amount of money," she repeated carefully. "That's a blessing. Why so much carrying on?"

"Because the entire encounter was so mysterious. Why

did she seem like she knew me? Who's her boss? I feel like I'm in a '90s psychological thriller."

Della tsked at this. "Sounds like you're looking for trouble. Unexpected money is a gift, looks like to me. Not everything needs investigating."

Leaning forward in her seat, Ricki responded, “But weird, surreal things have been happening to me lately.”

Weird, surreal things happen all the time, thought Della.

In the months since Dr. Bennett’s passing, she’d been dreaming about family she hadn’t seen in years and friends she’d known a lifetime ago, as a child. Sometimes, in the vague, neither-here-nor-there moments before waking up, she’d imagine seeing her favorite playmate, Jean-Marie, sitting on her bedroom floor in pigtails and a pinafore, with a bandage on her scraped knee, as clear as if it were 1931. No doubt, it was her brain’s meditation on loss, a way to still the current of sadness that had run under her surface ever since losing her husband. It was lovely in the moment, but when she fully awoke, all she felt was emptiness. As sweet as the subconscious reunions were, the one person she’d give anything to see was her Dr. Bennett, but he was never there.

She started to tell Ricki all of this but decided against it. Della was an orderly woman. Everything in her world had a place. Her tea set stayed on the bottom right shelf of her china closet, and her private thoughts stayed in her head. Plus, that girl was fantastical enough as it was. No need to exacerbate her condition with more outlandish tales.

“Speaking of Ali,” Della said, smoothly changing the subject. “Thank heaven you finally broke up with him.”

“Ali might be *the* most incoherent person I’ve ever met. What was I thinking?”

“No telling. His corn bread isn’t done in the middle, I know that much.” “Ha!” Ricki guffawed. But then, slowly, she sank into preoccupation,

her brow stormy with concentration. “I just can’t let last night go. It’s funny

—before I left Atlanta, my dad said something that stuck with me. He said that I let things happen to me. That I end up in crazy scenarios that I need to be rescued from.” She shook her head. “No. I’m not going to passively accept these odd encounters. I’m going to figure this out, myself.”

Della set her teacup back in its saucer, attempting to steady her trembling hands. “You idolize your daddy, don’t

you?”

“No, he’s horrible,” said Ricki, too quickly. “Well, no. I sort of look up to him. Everybody does. I don’t know—I’ve always felt connected to him in an inexplicable way. He’s tough and definitely not… a big talker? But sometimes we share a look, a silent acknowledgment when something

absurd or funny happens. He's not like that with anyone else. Sometimes I feel like he's on my side. More than my sisters and mom, at least. Who knows? In a different life, or maybe if I wasn't his daughter, he'd believe in me."

"Ah. So that's what you're doing here, with Wilde Things. You're creating a different life. So he can see your worth."

Speechless, Ricki stared at her for a few beats, her always-expressive eyes widened to comical proportions.

I'm so good at this, thought Della. *I was born at the wrong time. If I were a modern woman, I'd be a brilliant psychologist. Maybe I'd write a few self-help books. I've been told I have the eyewear of an intellectual.*

"Listen here," Della continued, on fire. "You uprooted your whole life. You're starting over in a new city. You opened the prettiest flower shop I ever did see, and built most of it with your own bare hands. Are these not big risks? Your father seems like an impressive man, but I disagree with him. You are *not* a woman who lets things happen to her."

Ricki sat there, seemingly stunned by this information. Della wondered if she'd ever had anyone build her up before. Underneath the twenty-eight- year-old woman, she saw a neglected kid. And Della knew what that looked like. She'd never known her parents, and she was raised by her Reconstruction-era grandma. The daughter of formerly enslaved people, Nana was a rigid, strict woman who worshipped God, cleanliness, and silence. For safety's sake, kids were to be seen, not heard—though on second thought, they weren't even meant to be seen. For little-girl Della, Nana's approval was somewhere beyond a dangerous curve in the road: a route too tricky to navigate.

She wished she could tell her newfound granddaughter that the smartest thing she could do for herself was set her own standards for living. Her father be damned. But Ricki would have to learn that lesson on her own.

"Enough about me," exhaled Ricki, waving a hand in the air, as if to wipe the conversation away. "How are you doing? I haven't even asked you how you've been coping

lately. Is your therapist helping you manage your grief?”

With a resigned sigh, Della slipped her hand into the pocket of her pajama pants, whipped out the TV remote, and turned it off. She swiveled to face Ricki. “I dozed off during our last call.”

“No! Tell me you didn’t.”

“I absolutely did. I might be in Jane Fonda’s shape, but I’m old, after all. Jane could probably tell you that the older you get, the harder it is to stay awake when you’re bored.” Della shrugged. Actually, she was starting to feel a bit drowsy right now. “Besides. How’s a stranger going to tell me how to grieve for my Bennett, my love that she never even met? You can’t cheat grief, Ricki. You have to work with it. Accommodate it.”

Her eyes went misty, and a shadow of a smile lit up her face. “You know, Dr. Bennett was one of the first Black neurologists in the country. He used to go to medical conferences all over the world. He knew I loved silk pajamas, and he’d buy me a pair wherever he went. I’ll have to show you the snake-print ones he got me from Hong Kong; they’re terribly eccentric. Right up your alley.” She sipped her tea. This was a compliment. “I tell you, I’d known him since I was sixteen, and it never occurred to me that one day, one of us would go. And the other would be alone. We were peas in a pod.”

“The kind of love that makes you ignore inevitability, right?” Ricki went and sat next to her, holding her hand. “It sounds so rare, outside of movies or books. I’ve definitely never seen it. My parents act more like coworkers than lovers. The happiest I ever saw my mom was when she was seeing that energy healer.”

Della scoffed. “That foolishness works?”

“No, I mean she was *seeing* an energy healer, as in sleeping with him.

He worked out of a mall kiosk at

Phipps Plaza.” “Well, I’ll *be*.”

“When Dad found out, he ran him out of town. Mom’s been drunk ever since.” Ricki sighed and fluffed her hair. “Anyway. You and Dr. Bennett sound like a dream.”

Della smiled softly. “I talk to him every day. Just before bed, I tell him everything that’s on my mind. The day he answers, I’ll know I’ve finally lost my marbles.”

And then, with a curt nod, she effectively ended the conversation. She’d exposed a bit too much emotional truth

for her liking.

“Oh, Ricki! Did I tell you about my widow bucket list?”

“You haven’t. And I insist that you tell me everything, immediately.” “It’s a few things I always wanted to try. I was happily married, of

course, but a woman always has her secret wants." She traded out her usual glasses for reading specs and then scrolled through her iPad, the font size positively mammoth. "Ah yes, here we go."

1. Dye my hair fluorescent pink.
2. Date a woman. Preferably younger.
3. Visit one of those nude Russian bathhouses.
4. Ride a helicopter over Manhattan.
5. Bury a grudge.

Ricki clapped with glee. "Date a woman, Ms. Della? Do you think you might be bisexual?"

"No label, I'm just curious." She paused, for effect. "What I am not, is polyamorous."

Ricki giggled as she glanced down at her phone on her lap. She finished her cup in two huge swallows. "I love this for you! But I really am sorry, Ms. Della. I'm going to have to run. If I don't figure out the mystery behind that assistant, I'm going to disintegrate. And I'd like to live long enough to meet your girlfriend."

To Della, it was clear that surrounding herself with drama and chaos made Ricki feel safer than standing still did. As a person who'd spent a lifetime preoccupying herself with her husband's needs—without time to ever examine her own—Della understood this. And she was touched by Ricki's vulnerability.

And she would protect her, as much as Ricki would let her. As Della prepared herself for a midday nap, she dimly wondered why the universe had brought them together. She'd never believed in coincidences or chance meetings. But it was surprising to find such kinship in her advanced age. Especially with someone so young.

Slipping into sleep, she decided not to fuss over why they'd met. If she'd learned anything over the years, it was that answers to tough questions usually revealed themselves when you least expected it.

Ricki closed Wilde Things an hour early, which probably wasn't an excellent business decision, given that her business needed the money. *She* needed the money. That morning, she'd had to force herself to mail the $5,000 in cash to Ali (along with his toothbrush, condoms, and crystals).

The more her calls to Mysterious Benefactor went unanswered, the deeper her obsession became. It was a Rubik's Cube of confusion, the unsolvable conundrum. Over and over, she pored over every detail, trying to understand what had happened. It was clear that the assistant knew her from somewhere, but she just couldn't imagine how, or from what. Ricki had no roots in New York. And her only two friends were a scandal-plagued actress and a frisky nonagenarian, neither of whom had ever met that woman. Ricki knew this for a fact because she'd asked them both, several times.

There was nothing left to do but to call an emergency meeting with Tuesday, who was now perched on Ricki's bed. The ancient radiator clanged out near-tropical heat as the two attempted to sleuth. It was the only other sound in the room besides Stevie Wonder's deeply obscure instrumental 1979 album *Journey Through the Secret Life of Plants*. She played it every evening for her flowers. In her soul, she was convinced that the songs made them brighter, happier, and livelier. Like audio Miracle-Gro. "Respectfully, what the hell is this avant-garde-ass album we're listening to?"

"Stevie."

"Nicks?"

"Wonder. He wrote it as the soundtrack for a botanical documentary. The songs activate the spatiotemporal consciousness of my flowers." "Thank God you found me," Tuesday muttered, absentmindedly running a jade roller across her cheekbones. "Okay, let's go over it again. When you asked the weird lady who her boss was, she responded, 'I'm not at liberty to say.' That's oddly

formal.”

“And she sounded a little pissed off. Like, annoyed that I kept asking her questions.” Ricki was perched in her comfort spot, the bench at the antique piano.

She’d furnished her microscopic studio with a clever mix of stoop sale and IKEA finds, but despite creating a cozy-as-hell space with tons of soft surfaces, Ricki’s absolute favorite place to sit, create, and think was at that

piano. Sometimes, after a long day at Wilde Things, she'd plop down and fall asleep there, her cheek resting on the smooth lid, inhaling the musky scent of old wood. To Ricki, the piano was as comfy as the softest bed.

Tuesday thought it looked like a kitchen island, and actually, it did. But Ricki didn't care; she loved it.

"You called the number, and nothing?"

"I've called so often I wish I could block *myself*." Ricki tucked her foot under her thigh. "But this brings me to motivation. That painting was good, but five thousand dollars?"

"That painting is sexy. I'm telling you, Mysterious Benefactor has a crush. He must've seen your portrait on the flyers that were all over the neighborhood. And then sent his assistant to buy it. Please, this is a person playing chess, and now it's your move. Mysterious Benefactor wants to be found. I feel it."

"Why are we so sure it's a man?"

"Intriguing point," said Tuesday. "It could be anyone. 'Cause if a man's spending thousands, he's not sending an assistant. No matter how busy men are, if they're feeling you, they show up. Look, B2K was in the middle of a world tour, and yet every member attended the premiere of my ABC Family Halloween film, *Witch Way to Heaven*."

"The entire band? Even

Omarion?" "Well… no. Just

Lil' Fizz."

"Make it the whole band in your memoir."

"Bet," she agreed, jotting down notes in her phone. Then abruptly she shot up to a sitting position, knocking three pillows onto the floor. "WAIT. Ricki, what's their phone number? Like, the area code?"

Ricki grabbed her phone off the piano top, scrolling through contacts. "It's 212. Why?"

"That's a New York City landline. *A landline!* Do you know what this means?"

Ricki gasped. "The person didn't pick up because they're probably just not home! Maybe they're on a business trip or something? Who even has a landline in 2024?"

“The point,” said Tuesday patiently, “is that we can trace a landline. To an actual location.”

“You know how to do that?”

“Chile, I used to be so toxic. Gimme your phone.”

A mere twelve minutes later, Tuesday landed on an address.

“592 West 152nd Street. That’s Sugar Hill, expensive as hell. There’s no apartment number, so the person lives in the whole townhouse. Mysterious *Millionaire* Benefactor.”

Every instinct, every impulse, was telling Ricki to go to the address. But wasn’t that the old her? Hadn’t she uprooted her entire life to start a new chapter?

Her mom always told this story about how on the first day of Ricki’s tadpole swim class, all the other two-year-olds were terrified and clinging to their babysitters, but Ricki was outraged that she wasn’t allowed to swim on her own. Later, at home, when no one was watching, she sprinted outside to their backyard pool and belly flopped into the deep end. Absolutely no hesitation. Luckily, seventeen-year-old Rae saw this play out from her upstairs bedroom window, but by the time she’d frantically fished out her baby sister, Ricki was losing consciousness. After Rae’s frantic mouth-to- mouth resuscitation, Ricki came to, sputtering and coughing like crazy. And then, maddeningly, she fell over on the grass, giggling with delight. It was an adventure!

Ricki still got yearly ear infections from that adventure. She couldn’t afford to risk more consequences. Especially since she had no health insurance.

“Maybe… maybe we shouldn’t go,” she said, backtracking. “Really, Tuesday, what will I gain from finding out who Mysterious Benefactor is? I know my true crime podcasts—what if it’s an elaborate ruse for some sick fuck to lure me out there to my death? Honestly, none of this matters anyway. We’re all just specks stuck to a floating rock hurtling through space.”

“Mysterious Benefactor might, in fact, kill you. But we all die of something.”

Incredulous, Ricki stared at her friend. “See, what I really need right now is a sane person to discourage me from these antics.”

“Your vibe attracts your tribe, babe.” Tuesday shrugged.

“I didn’t invent science.”

As badly as Ricki needed to solve this mystery, she recognized this feeling of attraction to a man with an impossible situation. She was battling

with herself. That was the old her, and she'd moved a zillion miles from home to rebrand her personality. To be more disciplined, focused.

Ricki looked at Tuesday. Tuesday looked at Ricki. They hopped up and snatched their coats from her closet.

It was 7:30 p.m., Ricki and Tuesday were still camped outside of 592 West 152nd Street, and Mysterious Benefactor had not appeared. From behind the massive oak across the street, they'd surveilled the elegant limestone townhouse for the better part of two hours. Every twenty minutes or so, they'd circle the block to avoid looking like the creepers they were. The shades were drawn, and their only hope was that they'd catch Mysterious Benefactor entering or exiting the house.

The sun had gone down, and now they were freezing, stomping their feet to stay warm.

"Should we just come back another time?" asked Ricki, warming her gloved hands on her third to-go cup of steaming coffee from a nearby bodega. Fifteen minutes ago, she'd asked the lady behind the bodega counter if she knew who lived at the address, and received a stony glare.

"You wearin' a wire?"

"No! I'd never work with cops," insisted Ricki. "Abolish and defund, am I right? Fuck the police."

The woman cracked her gum, bored. "Where you from?" "Georgia."

"It shows," she said. And then looked beyond her. "Next."

Back at the tree, Tuesday huddled up to Ricki for warmth. Tuesday's teeth were chattering, but she refused to abandon their quest.

"We can't surrender now. We're in too deep!" she whisper-shouted. "Life is a funny thing, girl. Just think, if you'd never met Ali, he'd never have painted you, and we wouldn't be out here catching pneumonia."

"You know what? I've decided that Ali was a mistake I

had to make," said Ricki, shivering. "The universe was like, you wanna keep sleeping with clowns? Let me present you with the king of clowns and have him

embarrass the living hell out of you in public so you really learn the lesson."

Ricki paused, because Tuesday was suddenly, silently tugging on her arm. Whipping her head around, she saw the front door was opening.

A man. So it *was* a man. But the darkness obscured his face.

Leaving the door of the stately house open behind him, the guy stormed down the stoop and across the street, headed straight for Ricki. Before she had time to breathe, think, or speak, he was right in front of her. And then she *really* saw him.

She took in his chiseled features. The breathtaking fire in his eyes. It was him.

Mysterious Benefactor was Garden Gentleman.

"Go," he commanded in a melodic, deep voice. "Stop trying to contact me. Stop staring in my windows. And get out of Harlem, now, while you still can." His eyes bore into hers, his expression a silent flash of lightning, a force too tremendous to distill into one feeling.

And then he lowered his voice to a desperate rasp. *"Please. Go."*

Thunderstruck, she stood her ground and locked eyes with him. And then something shifted. His expression went from alarm to aching tenderness. In one blink, he'd softened.

Ricki felt a punch of emotions in her chest, almost knocking her off her feet. She didn't know this man, his name, or why he was so insistent that she leave. Or why, for one unmistakable moment, he'd gazed at her with unbearable, bone-melting sweetness. Maybe he was an unpredictable stranger and she was possibly in danger. But her instincts buzzed louder than that thought. Ricki wanted to go to him, a feeling as sure and natural as surrendering to gravity.

Her whole life leading up to this breath felt inconsequential, sepia tinted: before.

"Go!" he repeated, louder, as if to startle them both back to reality.

Ricki snapped out of her daze. She grabbed Tuesday's arm, and they fled into the night.

CHAPTER 6

SEXY SEPIA SHENANIGANS

November 25, 1927

Go!" bellowed a furious, burly man with a pencil tucked behind his ear, slamming the front door. *"Don't come back!"*

It was a testament to how loud Mickey Macchione was that Breeze Walker could hear him across the nightclub (and in the middle of band rehearsal, no less). Mickey was head manager of Harlem's swankiest new cabaret, Eden Lounge, and he had a business to run! But he kept getting interrupted by a pushy loser banging on the front door.

It was 6:00 p.m. on Friday, and Eden Lounge was gearing up for the greatest Thanksgiving shindig Harlem had ever seen. Doors would open in two hours.

From Breeze's vantage point on the bandstand, he could see Mickey's portly, squat frame waddling through the club in his direction.

"I'm trying to work!" Mickey's voice was blaring. "And here's dat filthy hobo again, knocking down the door asking for Breeze. I got a show to put on!"

No, *Breeze* had a show to put on. But true to his name, he never got ruffled. He couldn't. As the bandleader of the house band, he had show-day multitasking down to a science. Whether he was hand-holding a clarinetist whose wife had put him out or chatting up the newspapermen who swarmed Eden Lounge before opening hours, keeping cool

was key.

Breeze Walker and the Friday Knights were Eden's main attraction. Well, after the showgirls, who were a mix of great beauties with iffy talent, great beauties with *other* talents, and elite dancers ousted from Cotton Club auditions for being over twenty-one, under five foot six, or unable to pass the "brown paper bag" complexion test. Was Eden Lounge ashamed to pick up the Cotton Club's castoffs? Absolutely not.

The Cotton Club had white patrons only? Eden Lounge was integrated. The Cotton Club boasted a tasty Chinese food menu? Eden Lounge served slap-yo-mama Jamaican food. The Cotton Club hired monster pianist, paragon of style, and lady-killer-about-town Duke Ellington to lead their house band? Eden Lounge recruited his only rival in all three areas, his buddy Breeze Walker, who, depending on who you asked, was even slicker than Duke.

And his band was tight, too. Breeze had just led the Friday Knights through a rehearsal of his latest hit, "Happy Sad," but it felt… stiff. Humming to himself, he paced back and forth, tapping out the tune in the air and trying to feel what was missing.

"Breeze Walker!" hollered Mickey, red-faced and barging through the chorus line of twenty-five dancers shimmying in itty-bitty rehearsal rompers.

"Breeze!" He stood in front of him, meaty fists on his hips. "BREEZE!" "What? I'm working!"

"You deaf? I been cawlin' you! Some hobo keeps ringing the bell and fuckin' up our rehearsal flow. I don't got time for your demented fans."

"They're not demented. They're dedicated," he said cheerfully, adjusting the newsboy cap slipping off Mickey's ham-hock-sized head. He motioned for the band to take five. It wouldn't be the first time he talked his boss off the ledge.

Breeze was coming up on his fifth anniversary in Manhattan, and there was almost no trace of the wide-eyed kid who'd walked down Lenox with Sonny, gawking at cosmopolitan life in the big city. Today, he was impeccably tailored in a pin-striped navy three-piece suit (in the new

fitted style as Paris dictated), silk pocket square, spats, and mother-of-pearl cuff links. He'd read Webster's dictionary front to back at least six times, and he boasted a vocabulary that proudly masked his iffy education and country roots, except for when he was animated or angry. Then, folksy Fallon

County-isms poured from him like heated molasses. He'd bought his brownstone in cash. When he cooked bourbon chicken, it was fresh meat from a gourmet market, not from a bird he'd killed out back (actually, he still wasn't used to that one). He had heat in the winter, state-of-the-art electric fans in the summer, and a robust savings account. And his music— his magic—took folks to places that most pianists couldn't find with a map. And yet even with all the glitzy upgrades, Breeze Walker was still himself. His parents' son and his sister's brother. Fallon County and all its horrors were never too far from his mind. By 1927, twenty-seven-year-old Breeze had learned that the only antidote for grief was to keep moving.

He composed more songs than he knew what to do with. Rehearsed deep into the night. Partied to feel nothing, fucked to feel something, and said yes to every gig worthy of him, because he knew that the bottom could fall out anytime. Breeze loved his adopted city. But New York was a seductive trickster, insatiable and hungry. The key was staying one step ahead of it. Let something like grief slow you down, and the city would swallow you whole.

He'd seen celebrated musicians, artists, writers, singers, ascend to unscalable heights, only to vanish into oblivion in a blink. No one stayed on top forever.

The idea of becoming a footnote haunted Breeze. No, as long as music thrummed through him, he had to play. It was his spiritual nourishment.

"Demented, dedicated, whatevah," grumbled Mickey. "Listen, that *New York Times* dame, Olive Randall? She'll be here soon for the interview. She's reporting on Harlem nightlife—you know da drill. Sexy sepia shenanigans."

Breeze chuckled. "She should interview you, Mickey." "Nah, I don't tawk good."

"I don't talk *well*," corrected Breeze.

"Aw, don't say that. You tawk great!" Mickey pounded him on the back and waddled off.

Shaking his head with amusement, Breeze turned to the Friday Knights. "Band!" he called out. "What's jazz?"

“Freedom!”

Breeze sighed with melodramatic disapproval. Taking a wide stance with his hands clasped behind his back, he repeated, *“WHAT’S JAZZ?”*

“FREEDOM!”

“Thank you,” he said evenly. “Jazz is *freedom*. Jazz is *lawless*. Jazz is a *dare*. So get loose, fellas! Y’all wound up tighter than a hair in a biscuit. We’re selling a fantasy. Never let ’em see how hard you work. Now, let’s *cook*.”

The Friday Knights, sufficiently energized, clamored into position. “Clarence!” hollered Breeze. “Back up off that drumroll; this ain’t no magic act. Floyd! Five demerits for that uninspired bow tie. Stay clean, or don’t be seen.”

“Delroy! Look around, please.”

Delroy swiveled his head to the left and right, confused. “What I’m looking for, boss?”

“The jig. Where’s it at?” Delroy mumbled, “Up.”

“Yup. It’s obvious you’re still abusing that powder. Up there playing triple time,” he scolded. “What’d I tell you? Do cocaine; don’t let it do you. You’ll be replaced tonight. Skedaddle.”

Breeze took the bench. He raised his right hand in the air and dropped it, and then fifteen of Harlem’s meanest jazz musicians launched into “Happy Sad.”

The leggy showgirls, led by famed choreographer Lo Ellis, erupted in a syncopated riot of nose-touching kicks and sinuous shimmies. Lo certainly knew how to create a showstopping routine. Lo and her girlfriend, Behold, had starred in a wild, drug-fueled vaudeville act since the early ’20s, but while Lo had gotten clean, Behold hadn’t been as lucky.

The city swallowed her whole, thought Breeze. But he was playing on a level too clever for New York to catch him. He shut his eyes, taking in the melodies, the laughter, even the smell.

When he’d first started at Eden Lounge, Breeze hadn’t known why Eden Lounge smelled so intoxicating—he’d just known that every night, he’d head home in his tux, steeped in a potent floral scent. Finally, he’d asked Mickey what it was, and he’d pointed out the vases full of night-blooming

jasmine he put on each cocktail table every night. It was a special blossom, one that was closed during the day and awoke at night, exuding a heady scent into the dark. Who knew that Mickey Macchione's favorite hobby was flower gardening?

Just then, a tap on his shoulder shook Breeze out of his momentary reverie.

Appearing before him was a serious-looking blonde, maybe twenty-five, with clear green eyes. She had the carriage and demeanor of a well-bred exclamation point. Her visual opposite, Mickey, stood next to her with a big grin.

"Hey, Breeze, this is Miss Olive Randall of the *Times*. She's got questions for our maestro."

Breeze tipped his hat and offered her a pleasant smile. "Welcome to Eden, ma'am."

"Oh, I've been here before, Mr. Walker. Many times."

He gestured for the clarinet player to fill in for him, then led the reporter to the bar. She followed him, notebook-first.

Breeze pulled out a barstool for Olive. Without asking, the bartender slid him a seltzer.

"What're you having, Miss Randall?" asked Breeze, taking a seat.

"Just a Jack Rose, no ice. And do call me Olive. Please. No need for formalities."

Okay, thought Breeze. *She's liberated and liberal and wants me to know it.*

"It's such an honor to meet you, Breeze Walker," she gushed, tapping the eraser of her pencil on her pad, ready to roll. "I listen to your orchestra every Friday night, when Eden Lounge broadcasts on the radio! How did you get your start? Sources say you were discovered at a speakeasy about five years ago?"

He sipped his seltzer, nodding. "The Nest. I won a piano cutting contest and met Duke, who taught me how to write and read sheet music. Through him, I met this Brooklyn kid who'd written a few compositions for Broadway, George Gershwin. He gave me my first break. We collaborated on music for a show featuring a hoofer named Frank Astaire… no, Fred."

Poor fella, thought Breeze. *He wanted to work in*

Hollywood, but the studios said he was too bald to star in pictures. Hope he gets his chance.

"After that, I made a name for myself playing the Swing Street speakeasies, and—"

"And the rest is history!" Olive tucked her fashionable bob behind an ear, her eyes scanning the room. "I love all your songs—'Hotcha Gotcha,'

'Midnight Jasmine'—but 'Happy Sad' is wild. Reckless. It taps into something primitive, wouldn't you say?"

Breeze would not, in fact, say "primitive." So he changed the subject. "Can I ask why you're writing this article?"

"Well, because I love the scene, the art, your music. Up here, it's the only place I feel alive!" She stared up into his face earnestly. "Your music has lured whites up to Harlem. That act alone will change the world. It's revolutionary."

I don't have the heart to tell you it won't, thought Breeze. *It won't change the fact that where I'm from, we're hunted for sport. Won't change that left of Lenox, landlords charge us triple rent for infested slums 'cause they know we're so desperate to escape Mississippi, Alabama, or Tennessee that we'll work ourselves sick to pay it. Won't change that Harlem is a Band-Aid on cancer and that the hobo who keeps banging down Eden Lounge's door is most definitely my cousin Sonny, who destroyed himself with dope to forget what he's seen in our hometown. The world won't change simply 'cause you ventured uptown to have a good ole sexy Black time. All it means is you have good taste.*

Breeze was so tired.

On some days, the bad days, every step, breath, and note weighted him down, like shackles. And so he poured it into his music. The papers wrote things like "Breeze's sound is tailor-made for crowds heady with hedonism!" And "Wild music for wild times!" And "Breeze Walker captures euphoria in a bottle!"

What they heard as frenzied abandonment was the sound of his rage. Their joyous release was his escape, his chance to outrun the memories that stalked him. Jazz was freedom. But grief was his fuel. It was that simple and that terrible.

Breeze missed his family with a blazing ache. He'd make himself feel the memories and then pour their bitter taste into music. Into something good.

He remembered chaperoning his sister, Minnie, on dark country roads, her chatting relentlessly while they walked

her pet bunny, Hops. (The walks were largely pointless, as Hops was made out of a flour sack and straw. But, as his dad had drilled into him, *It don’t matter the why or when; always be a gentleman*.) He remembered that late at night, when he couldn’t let go of

whatever new song he was trying to master, his mom had calmed him by reciting recipes for collard greens, stewed okra, and shortbread, the singsongy cadence of her native Gullah dialect soothing him to sleep. He remembered the way his dad had hugged him, abrupt and fierce, at the depot before Breeze shipped off to war. Big Ezra did not hug. In fact, it happened so fast that for weeks after, Breeze thought he'd imagined it.

Without his family, he didn't belong anywhere in the world. He was furious about the way they'd died. In terror. *Who sets a church ablaze?* What kind of people can do that and walk away feeling… *right*? That was what seized him with rage. Breeze knew that in the stories these people told, they were right. That fire was justified to them; it was entertainment. The sheriff's wife had even taken photographs! Breeze heard they'd been passed around dinner parties at the finer Fallon County homes, until the postmaster ruined it with spilled gin.

Eight years later, the blaze was surely forgotten. That mob's grandkids and their grandkids' kids wouldn't even know their forefathers were monsters. And Breeze knew that what you haven't reckoned with, you're doomed to repeat. America was a ghost story with no end.

But Breeze was also lucky. He had a gift. He was lucky to be discovered at the right speakeasy by the right people. To be a man with no wife or children depending on him—he just had endless time to tinker with the notes that would blanket his brain.

Breeze knew he was lucky when he talked to the chorus line understudies and learned about the overtime work they did to stay afloat. When he thought of their mothers, rising before the sun to walk in a grim, humiliating parade down Fifth Avenue in the 1850s and '60s, calling out to the white women of the houses lining the block in hopes of being invited in for a day of cleaning, cooking, or babysitting. A modern selling block, to be sure.

My thoughts are a graveyard, he thought.

Sometimes, Breeze dreamed of drinking, smoking, or shooting up to forget. But he had no vices. He was too

lucky to justify them. The least he could do to honor his fallen family was to feel their loss. To remember.

But Breeze didn't tell Olive any of this. He was sad and angry—but not insane. Instead, he finished his seltzer and said gently, "Please take no offense, but our music was revolutionary before whites liked it, and it will

be after.”

Olive’s eyes widened with surprise.

“Enough about me,” said Breeze with an affable grin. “Let’s talk about Eden Lounge.”

“Are you telling me how to do my job, Mr. Walker?” she asked with a combative spark.

“Me? Never. I can’t tell a writer what to write. I named a song 'Hotcha Gotcha.’”

With a yelp of amusement, she continued jotting down notes and moved on to her next batch of questions.

A few minutes later, Breeze heard the BANG, BANG, BANG at the back-of-house door, and he jolted upright. Apologizing to Olive, he headed backstage in a flash. Winding past instrument cases, costume racks, and understudies smoking in huddles, he made it to the door, pushing it open against the brisk November winds.

It was Sonny. A gaunt, haunted figure with two black eyes, and the knee ripped from his trousers. No coat, no hat. He looked predictably ragged. But this time, he had shown up with something new: a mangy mud-colored terrier with eyes as hollow as his. He sat at Sonny’s worn shoes, looking miserable and panting erratically.

“Ezra. Breeze. Cuz. Help me, please. Just a dollar. Fifty cents.”

Breeze peered behind him to make sure no one could hear Sonny in this state. Everyone knew his cousin had turned into a dope fiend. Sonny was past caring what people thought, but Breeze always wanted to protect him.

Last year, Sonny had been caught necking with a white woman, parked in his new Model T Ford down in Brooklyn. Some Irishmen ran out of a bar with bats, bashing the car and then Sonny. But first, they made him take off his clothes. They left him naked, bloody, and humiliated in front of his woman and the cops, who threw him in jail. For a man like Sonny, the incident was akin to death. The attack hadn’t truly killed him, though, so heroin was the next best thing.

They wanna be us, Sonny had once said with faulty confidence. But Breeze knew different. *Yeah, they want to*

dance, dress, and talk like us. But inhabit our skin? Nah.

Breeze had moved Sonny in for a time, but Sonny kept disappearing. One day, he never returned. But sometimes, he'd show up to Breeze's gigs

like this, begging. Breeze handed him five dollars from his billfold, the way he always did. His cousin grabbed it with his scarred right hand—the constant reminder of his status as the only survivor of the Fallon County church fire. "Survivor" was debatable. Yes, he'd been the only person to walk away from that fire, but the Sonny that Ezra knew from before had faded to an almost-unidentifiable cipher. Yet another family member lost.

In thanks, Sonny held the cash to his heart. Before he scuttled off, Breeze grabbed his shoulder.

"Hey, remember what you told me?" Breeze asked, his voice unexpectedly cracking. "Ain't no place in America for a humble Negro. Remember who you used to be, Sonny. He's still in there."

Sonny chuckled sadly, most of his teeth missing. "He's been humbled." And then he was gone.

Breeze stood there for what felt like an eternity. It wasn't until he heard the low, hungry rumble by his feet that he realized Sonny'd left his dog behind.

An hour later, Breeze sat at the bar, fighting off a numbing melancholy and wondering what the hell he was going to do with a dog. The mutt hadn't left his side since he'd tossed him some bacon from the kitchen.

Breeze didn't believe in pets. It seemed unnatural to keep an animal inside the house, anthropomorphizing it. But then he looked down into the dog's watery, soulful eyes and folded.

All right, then. I guess you're mine now. I can't save Sonny, but maybe I can save you, he thought with glum resignation. *But I still hate dogs.*

The band was changing into tuxedos, and the chorus line was pounding out one final rehearsal. Breeze noticed a lead dancer suddenly grab her ankle and limp off the floor. Within seconds, an understudy ran out from the wings, taking her place.

His eyes followed her. The dog perked up his ears.

The understudy was not the best dancer. Nor was she

the prettiest. But she was attacking the choreography like she had a point to prove and wrongs to right. She was on fire and impossible to ignore. Breeze glanced around the room; everyone’s eyes were on her.

But her eyes fell on him. Her gaze bore into the hollow left by Sonny.

After rehearsal, the new dancer lingered behind. She took her time walking off the dance floor, going out of her way to pass Breeze at the bar. Pausing, she plucked a flower from a bouquet. Bringing the jasmine just under her nose, she inhaled luxuriously, staring at Breeze with unadulterated hunger. Carelessly, she dropped the flower and kept walking, its tender petals smashed under her heels.

The gesture was dismissive, ruthless—destroying such delicate beauty like that.

Her brand of destruction was exactly what Breeze needed.

CHAPTER 7

TRAGIC OR ROMANTIC?

February 5, 2024

"We're not going to talk about this?" asked Tuesday, through a yawn.

It was five o'clock on Monday morning. Ricki had been ignoring her calls since the stakeout. So, in an act of desperation, Tuesday joined her on her daily trip to the Flower District, the colorful block of floral markets on Twenty-Eighth Street in Chelsea. They imported flowers from farms all over the world—the Netherlands, Ecuador, Colombia—and opened early for retailers to have their choice of blooms before the general shopping rush.

"No, we're not talking about it," said Ricki, with curt finality, as she made her way through the stalls, a basket dangling from her forearm.

"But you and that dude? Ricki, that was not a stranger vibe. You recognized each other! Tell me I'm wrong."

"You're right. I told you, I saw him in that community garden the other day."

"No, I mean, it looked like you *knew* knew each other. In a deeper way. Like, from your past. Prom? Ex-fiancé? Brother-in-law that you accidentally slept with after one too many spiked eggnogs at Christmas?"

"You haven't seen my brothers-in-law."

Ricki stopped at a bush of begonias, kneeling down to

assess the color. Oh, this used to thrill her! She usually zoomed out of bed before dawn,

excited to take in the Technicolor spectacle of blooms and greenery. Watching seasoned Manhattan florists shop the stock, dreaming up design trends that would soon influence everything from textile prints to wedding style, was such an education.

Flower District shopping was one of her favorite parts of being a florist.

Not today, though.

Wilde Things had flatlined. Since her expensive, exquisitely curated creations just weren't moving, she'd taken to buying discounted stock, which translated to generic bouquets with only about eight hours of life left in them. She hoped that with Valentine's Day around the corner, maybe the arrangements would sell by default—even though she hated toning down her aesthetic to be palatable.

Ricki had known that running a business would be hard. God knew she'd been forced to listen to enough of her dad's TED Talks to know that entrepreneurship was about trying new things, failing, innovating, and trying again. But what if she just kept failing?

And was she failing because her focus was… elsewhere?

It was a strong possibility. She had tried, truly, but she couldn't banish Garden Gentleman—now Mysterious Benefactor—from her head. It had to mean something that they were the same person. Was she being stalked? Or was she just being a chaotic Gemini? No, Tuesday was right—something was there.

Historically, Ricki wasn't satisfied with unanswered questions, especially as she'd been raised in a house where nothing was questioned, ever. Ricki's world had been defined before she came into it, and her job was to toe the line.

"Your daddy is our leader," Carole had announced over breakfast when Ricki was five years old. "What he says goes."

"Why?"

"Men always lead. That's how the world works."

"But you're a big deal, too, right? You're an interior

decorator! Why's Daddy the leader just 'cause he's a man? Why is the stuff he's good at more special than what you're good at?"

"Because Eve ate the apple." "What if I want to be the boss?"

"You'll run franchises one day, like your sisters. But Daddy'll always be

the big boss."

"Corey Jacobs said Daddy's a… a… 'Republican race traitor.' Is that bad?"

"Lord. You like the pool at the country club,

don't you?" "I love it!"

"Then hush. Your only job in this world is to follow my directions. Where to go to school, what clubs to join, who to marry. Do what I say, and you'll always be the prettiest, smartest, most important girl in the room. Like your sisters. They were perfect angels who never caused one bit of trouble. And look how they turned out."

Five-year-old Ricki heard this loud and clear. So much so that she decided to practice. Hours later, Carole caught baby Ricki posed in front of the full-length mirror, dressed up in one of Carole's sequined Armani gowns, a pound of makeup, and a full-length fur. The white-satin-covered vanity was stamped in lipstick-coated fingerprints. Orange nail polish was spilled down the front of the fur.

"I'm the prettiest, smartest, and most important," she whispered to herself in Carole's drawl. "But the big boss will always be a Republican man. Because Eve liked apples."

Ricki would never forget turning and seeing the color instantly drain from Carole's face.

Grabbing Ricki's hand, she yanked her down the hall to the bathroom, stripped off the fur, and then pushed her into the shower, gown and all. Ricki toppled to the tiled floor, crying. It was all so confusing! She was trying to be like Carole! Wasn't that what she should be doing? When Ricki looked up, she was surprised to see that her mom had tears in her eyes, too.

"Was that your impression of me?" Carole's voice trembled. "Maybe I'm a joke to you now. But when you're older, everything I told you will make sense." Sniffling, she smoothed down her soft, roller-set curls. "I'm just teaching you how to be easier to love."

As a kid, Ricki had no answers. But adult Ricki made it her mission to find them.

Get out of Harlem, now, while you still can.

What did it mean? As badly as she wanted to turn her life upside down to solve that mystery, to understand the curious electric charge that passed between herself and that stranger, she couldn’t. She had a business to keep

alive, and no time to chase white rabbits. But Tuesday wouldn't leave it alone.

"You're not curious about who he is? Or why he told you to leave town?"

"The problem is I'm too curious." Ricki folded her arms in front of her chest. "All I know is that I can't engage. Fine men with complicated stories are my kryptonite."

"I mean, we all have a past."

"We do. But… well, mine is especially outrageous." Ricki hesitated a beat. She'd never shared the more ridiculous parts of her history with anyone. Yes, she and Tuesday shared an instant, undeniable connection. But still, if her new best friend knew too much about her, wouldn't she be put off?

"Listen, Ricki. I've seen and done it all. You can tell me anything, and I'd never judge you," said Tuesday, reading her mind. She pulled a flower out of Ricki's basket. "I swear on this daisy."

It was a chrysanthemum, but Ricki was touched nonetheless. For a fleeting moment, it occurred to her that if she hadn't moved to Harlem, she'd have missed out on finding Tuesday. That one decision had led her to a kindred spirit.

"You've heard of UniverSoul Circus, right?" Ricki asked. "When I was sixteen, I fell in love with the eighteen-year-old tightrope walker. When my parents found out, they sent me to live with my aunt for the summer, to get him out of my system. But instead, I joined the circus with him."

Tuesday gawked. "As… what?"

"Well, I can juggle. Mom made me learn party tricks to entertain dinner guests."

"I think we have the same mother."

"The next year, I saw this cutie steal T-shirts from Target. He set off the alarms at the exit, but I told security it was a mistake, he was with me and he'd thought I paid for those shirts. This guy said he was new to Atlanta and had nowhere to stay, so I snuck him into my parents' house, and he lived in my room for two weeks. The house is

big enough that no one noticed. One day, I woke up and he was gone. He'd stolen all the nonperishable food in our pantry."

"No."

"*And* my Mom's good wigs."

They walked in silence for a full minute before Tuesday responded.

"It's funny, I'm used to being the protagonist in every situation. For the first time, I'm a supporting character. I like it here."

Nearby, a curly-haired twenty-something salesman let out a yelp. "Tuesday Rowe! I love you! What have you been up to?"

"Oh, just waxing and waning with the moon." She slipped on her shades, and they kept strolling. "Continue, Ricki."

"Anyway, I'm sick of toxic adventures. I just want to focus on Wilde Things. Tuesday, I need to make this work."

Tuesday threw an arm over her shoulders. "And you will, babes. You got this! We're not letting a wealthy maniac block your blessings."

The two kept browsing until they finally reached Ricki's favorite seller, Macchione's Tropical Flowers. Kelly Macchione was the friendly brunette who ran her family's company, which was started by her great-grandfather, a 1920s nightclub manager who moved on to flowers during the Depression. Kelly grinned brightly at her, and she waved back with a wan, embarrassed smile. Ricki hadn't been able to afford her blooms in weeks.

Ashamed, Ricki peered down at the last-choice flowers in her basket: a sad array of basic blossoms with just-about-to-wilt petals.

"Look at all these basic pastels," she said with a sigh. "The Megyn Kelly of flower assortments."

Tuesday nodded sadly.

"I think," said Ricki, "this is the beginning of the end."

Back at Wilde Things, exhausted at the end of another slow day, Ricki headed out for an aimless, defeated walk. She was about a block from the 145th Street Community Garden before she realized that was where her feet were taking her.

It was a frosty night, but it gave her the opportunity to wear a 1950s belted wool coat and dramatic faux-fur muff passed down from Ms. Della. (Ricki felt that romanticizing unpleasant things, like New York winters, was self-care.) She stood deep in the garden, just beyond the Eden Lounge plaque, with her face shoved into the night-blooming jasmine bush. The aroma—voluptuous, creamy, scientifically impossible—was making her

drowsy. Intoxicated by the scent and bathed in the crisp stillness of early- evening darkness, she didn't notice the obvious.

"Hello?" a male voice called out.

Ricki spun around at the same time a person emerged from the shadows.

She screamed. Reflexively, she executed a clumsy but effective dropkick, her block-heeled boot connecting solidly with his upper arm.

"Ow!" He grabbed his arm, stumbling backward in surprise. Garden Gentleman. Mysterious Benefactor. Fucking *him*.

Breathing heavily, Ricki hit the defensive stance she'd learned at Kick Start Martial Arts in eighth grade, her knees slightly bent, her fists blocking her face. "Are you following me?"

Mysterious Benefactor dropped his hand from his arm, his expression frustratingly unreadable. Ricki took a good, long look at him this time. The silvery glow of the moon softened the sculpted planes of his face. He had long inky-black lashes and a mouth that made her eyes cross. Tonight, he was dressed in the archetypal casual-cool NYC twenty-something look: Howard hoodie, double-breasted navy coat, desert boots.

"I repeat," she said, trying to quell the tremble in her voice. "Are you following me?"

"No," he said with weary resignation. "No."

Ricki's stomach flip-flopped, but she didn't lower her fists. It was the first time she'd heard him speak in a regular tone (ordering her to get out of town didn't count). That simple "no" made him seem flesh-and-blood real.

Which was even scarier than him being just an enigmatic mystery.

"No? Just no? You owe me an explanation." She hoped he couldn't sense how frightened she was. There was no world in which their run-ins were an accident, a twist of fate, a coincidence. Who the hell was this man? "Do I? You're the one following me." His voice was calm and his face

was steady, but there was a charged tension in his voice. “Me? I am not following you!”

“Right. You’re *stalking* me,” he said. “Were you not camped outside my house, staring in my windows? Taking pictures? For two hours?”

“Well…”

“You even had that girl from *Degrassi High* co-spying with you. Isn’t she on house arrest?”

“First of all, Tuesday was on *Ready Freddy*. Secondly, she’s not a wild

child anymore. She's a mild-mannered memoirist." Slowly, Ricki lowered her fists, her heart thumping wildly in her chest. "Now that we've cleared that up, who are you?"

He didn't answer. He just stood there, a scowl darkening his face. They watched each other, each waiting for the other to make a move. The moment crackled between them. And then, just as he opened his mouth to say something, he stopped and walked away.

"Wait! Where are you going?" Ignoring every red flag in her body, Ricki scurried behind him.

Exasperated, he turned to face her. "I'm leaving. This garden ain't big enough for the both of us. I don't want trouble. I came here for some fresh air and to fake-meditate on my anxiety app."

"Oh?" Ricki's interest was piqued, despite everything. And then, true to form, she overshared. "I have GAD. Generalized anxiety disorder. I'm familiar with all the apps. Which one is it?"

"Oh. Uh, I don't remember the name," he mumbled, slightly embarrassed. "I don't know, my life coach recommended it. Forget it."

Ricki got the message. This guy wasn't an open book.

"Look," she started, wanting to erase the past sixty seconds. "I did wait for you outside of your house. But I'm not a stalker. It's just that you paid a lot of money for that piece. I wanted some answers."

"Fine." He sighed impatiently and then took a few steps closer to her. He widened his stance and peered down at her. His stern, intense expression threatened to throw Ricki off her game. "You want answers?"

"Yes. Yes, I do."

She was helplessly drawn to him. The pull went far beyond her attraction to terrible men. Those were passing fascinations, whereas this felt like the beginning of something, the framework of something sprawling, like a trellis under a vine.

"Fine, I'll give you five minutes," he was saying. "Ask me anything." Ricki folded her arms across her chest. "Do you know me?"

“No.”

“Am I in danger?”

He rubbed the back of his neck, staring at the ground.

“No.”

“Then why the drama?” She deepened her voice, imitating him. *“‘Go! Now!’”*

“It was an overreaction.”

“'Get out of Harlem while you still can’ isn’t an overreaction. It’s a warning. A threat. Did my father thug you into doing this? To scare me into leaving town?”

He raised a brow, interested. “Who’s your dad? He sounds menacing.” “Richard Wilde. He owns a national chain of funeral homes.”

“Where he buries his enemies?”

“Okay, this isn’t about my dad,” she blurted out impatiently. It was maddening trying to get a direct answer out of this man.

He thrust his hands deeper into his pockets. “Look, I saw your portrait on the Sweet Colette flyers stapled around the neighborhood. I thought you were pretty.”

Shyly, she looked down at her shoes. “You thought I was pretty?”

“The *portrait*. I thought the portrait was pretty,” he said clumsily. “I didn’t even put two and two together that it was you. The woman I saw in the garden.”

“Oh.”

“Anyway, I wanted to remain anonymous, so I sent my assistant to buy it. She lives nearby. I just like to support young artists.” He shrugged. “I was a young artist, once.”

“Once?” Squinting at him, Ricki took three steps closer. “How old are you?”

He took three steps back. “Twenty-eight.”

This guy’s energy was confused, like he was caught between needing to get away from Ricki and wanting to stay.

“You do know how creepy this sounds, right? You bought it anonymously… for what?”

“I wanted it,” he said with a simple shrug. “No more, no less.”

Ricki’s breathing stuttered. He moved with such easy, masculine strength—even his shrug. Leonine.

“And do you get everything you want?”

He scratched his exquisite jaw slowly. “No. That would be boring, wouldn’t it?”

Ricki’s mouth went dry, and she swallowed.

This will not do. She could not join a circus for another handsome stranger. She had a business to run!

“Well. I’m sorry for stalking you,” she said.

“Have a nice life.” Ricki walked around him, headed down toward the gate. “Hey.”

This time, he was the one to stop her. Ricki turned around.

“I’m sorry I reacted the way I did when you showed up to my house. I’m a private person. I didn’t want to be found.”

“Whatever you say,” she said, anxious to leave. Between his overwhelming physicality, the jasmine-scented breeze, and the irresistible mystery of him, she was due to lose her head any minute. She had to save herself and get away.

But neither one of them moved. “Should I go, or you?” asked Ricki.

“With all due respect, I was here first.” He crossed his arms in front of his chest. She saw his biceps flex under his coat.

“It’s a community garden—it belongs to all of us.”

“No, it’s mine,” he said quietly, a competitive edge in his tone. He was putting off his departure. “I’ve been coming here for years. You’re new to Harlem.”

She scowled, immediately on defense. “Wait. How could you know that?”

“I can tell. You have that fascinated look. Everything’s still interesting to you. Your eyes are ravenous, like you’re looking everywhere at once. Real New Yorkers have seen it all.”

“I’m from Atlanta, not Antarctica.”

“Okay,” he said with a satisfied smile, a mocking edge in his tone. “But Atlanta’s not New York.”

Hands on her hips, she asked, “Well, how long have you lived here?”

“I don’t anymore. But whenever I’m in town, I come back to the garden. That scent is really calming; it helps me think.” Hands still in his pockets, he cocked his chin toward the highly fragrant tall cluster of jasmine.

He smells them too, she thought, which was baffling. Ricki had assumed it was a side effect of her overactive

imagination.

“Do you know how rare that is?” she asked. “I own a flower shop.

Those flowers blooming in winter? It makes no scientific sense.”

“It’s February of a leap year,” he said. “Nothing makes sense till

March.”

Ricki could feel him watch her. She moved backward, brushing against the bush. Petals fell to the ground, and she gently picked them up, cupping them gingerly in her palm. Something sparked in his expression, a quick flare that faded before she could grasp it.

“I hate hurting nature,” she said sadly.

“It hurts us all the time,” he said, his voice hard but his face soft. Their eyes met, and then they both looked away.

And then, because she was completely in over her head, because her defenses melted a little, Ricki felt it again: the terrible urge to share a random fact. The compulsive need to make things weird with one of her extremely niche tidbits.

Don’t do it, she thought. *Don’t unload the jasmine story onto this mysterious, enigmatic creature who’s already established that he has anxiety and just…*

“Indian mythology has a story about night-blooming jasmine,” she blurted out. “There was once a beautiful princess who fell in love with the sun god, and he loved her, too. Deeply. But he refused her, because he was terrified that he’d burn her. She couldn’t live without him, so she set herself on fire. And from her ashes grew a lavish tree with yellow and white blooms that flowered only at night, releasing a sweet fragrance symbolizing her eternal devotion. But the petals closed during the day, because the memory of the sun, her lost love, was too painful to bear.”

Ricki took a deep breath, realizing that she, once again, had embarrassed herself in a fraught social situation. She turned around to leave.

“But do you think it’s tragic or romantic?” he asked.

She looked back, frankly stunned that he’d listened. And cared enough to respond. “What did you say?”

“The story. Is it tragic or romantic?”

“To… to me, it’s romantic. Wildly romantic.”

“I think it’s tragic,” he said, burrowing a little into his scarf. “Abandoning your love because you know your love will hurt them? Sounds like torture.”

“Sounds like you know from experience.” Ricki met his eyes. He nodded at her. “I really should go now.”

Yet he still didn’t budge. Why was this so hard? Ricki felt a powerful

physical pull drawing her toward him. Did he feel it? It was inescapable. Every time she tried to leave, she couldn't. Well, she didn't want to. And it was clear that he didn't, either.

Maybe this was an enchanted garden. Maybe it was just leap year weirdness. Resigned, she sat down on a wrought-iron bench under an apple tree.

"What kind of artist are you?" she asked.

"Musician." The tension eased in his face, as if he were relieved she gave him a reason to stay.

"A musician who fake-meditates in public gardens."

He chewed at his bottom lip and eventually joined her on the opposite side of the bench. "I'm a city person, but I need to be around green things sometimes. It's almost soundproof here. You can't really hear the cars or the people. None of that city caterwauling. Just the birds, and the trickle of the pond."

Caterwauling? Such an outdated word.

"Country sounds are louder than city ones sometimes," she said.

She saw him notice her dirt-encrusted fingernails on her lap. Quickly, she wiped her hands together. "Sometimes I like to ground myself by feeling the earth. I don't know, it feels like an ancient human ritual. Like cozying up to a fire for warmth or balancing a baby on your hip."

He leaned back against the bench, tilting his face up to the sky. "Marveling at the moon."

She looked upward. "Yeah."

"Is that why you opened a flower shop? Because plants feel elemental and powerful, older than us?"

The breath went out of Ricki. No one had ever asked. Or gotten it, without her telling them.

"Yes. And I also love delicate, soft things. A beautifully composed song.
Handwritten notes. A gorgeous meal. Cultivating beauty energizes me."

The trees shifted in the icy wind, moonlight spilling through the branches.

"You're an aesthete," he said.

“I guess I am,” she said, beaming. It was enormously flattering to have a fascinating stranger see this in her. “Aesthete. It’s one of my favorite words.”

He didn’t smile, but she saw his eyes sparkle.

“What kind of musician are you?” she asked, loosening up. “Let me guess. You look like a producer. Mumble rap? K-pop? Brooklyn drill?”

And then there it was. The barest shadow of a smile. She detected a small dimple and instantly felt her cheeks flush. Jesus. That smile was potent, special, the kind of smile that should be saved for formal occasions. Like your finest jewelry.

“Out of all the genres, why those?” he asked. “And Chicago drill is superior to Brooklyn.”

“You’ve obviously made a good living in music if you’re able to invest thousands into anonymous painters. Impressive at our age. It’s so hard to be both creatively fulfilled and financially secure.”

He leaned forward, elbows on his knees, hands clasped together. “Is creativity more important to you than security?”

“I want both,” she said assertively. “I
want it all.” His lips curved upward
slowly. “You’ll get it.”
Ricki was entranced by his quiet, solemn intensity. His
deep, rich voice.
Her thighs were fucking liquid, and she didn’t even know his name.

This man could quite possibly ruin my life, thought Ricki.

Go. Now.

“On that note,” she said, standing up. “I really should get home. Good talk, Garden Gentleman Slash Mysterious Benefactor.”

“Who?”

“Long
story.”

He stood up, too, and with almost courtly formality dipped his head and said, “Evening, ma’am.”

For the first time, Ricki noticed the slow, syrupy stretch of his vowels. There were definite New York-ish inflections, but she also heard touches of an almost Low Country drawl. Wherever he was from, his voice was unbearably

charming.

She waved goodbye awkwardly and then hurried away down the path.

She was halfway to the street exit when she heard him call out to her. “One last thing.”

She stopped in her tracks. He walked over from the bench, pausing about five feet in front of her. Casually, he leaned his shoulder against a gnarled oak tree and asked, “What’s your name?”

“Richard Wilde the Second. Ricki.”

“Pleasure to make your acquaintance,” he said. “Now I know who to file a restraining order against.”

“My stalking days are over,” she said, eyes sparkling. “What’s yours?” “Ezra Vaughn Percival Walker the Fourth or Fifth. Sixth? Not sure.”

Ricki’s mouth dropped open. “Stop. Your family did that several times before you?”

“The firstborn boy in every generation gets this name. No idea why, but there are worse ones. I had a cousin named Zeronald.”

She laughed, and his face broke into a smile so bright and so radiant, her breath caught. They stood in a silence that was too comfortable for two complete strangers. For five seconds that felt like five hours, they stood there, letting the moment wash over them.

It was intoxicating: the all-consuming darkness pierced with intermittent moonlight, this impossible-to-read man, the quiet luxury of the garden. Their fifteen-minute encounter had felt like a luscious waking dream. Later on, she’d blame the boldness of what she said next on the magic of the moment.

“I’m curious about you.”

He took one step closer, away from the tree. “Curiosity killed the cat, didn’t it?”

“It did.” She settled her gaze on a nearby winterberry bush. “But everyone forgets the rest of the saying.”

“What is that?”

“Curiosity killed the cat, but satisfaction brought it back,” she said quietly, and then met his eyes. “Whatever it saw or felt was so good that dying was worth it. The cat returns for more. Again and again. You know, nine lives and all that.”

“Chasing the rush.” Ezra took another few steps toward her, his tall frame dwarfing her. “And how many lives you got left?”

When she found her voice, she responded, “I think I’m on my last one.” “Don’t waste it.”

Before her brain could formulate a response, he said, “I’m going to leave now.”

“Right. Good.” She cleared her throat, breaking the spell. “Yes, go.” “But can we please agree to avoid each other? It’s better that way.
Believe me.”

Believe him? Ricki didn’t even know him! But he was right. Because whatever this was, was too overwhelming.

“I’ll forget we ever met, Ezra Vaughn Percival Walker the Sixth.” “Thank you. And just so you know,” he said, “I’m curious, too.”

He dipped his chin in farewell. Then he walked out onto 145th Street. And Ricki knew, without knowing, that she would definitely see Ezra again.

CHAPTER 8

STROKE OF GENIUS

February 6, 2024

Ricki's mind was cluttered. An early-morning inspiration walk was in order.

Armed with a map of Jazz Age Harlem procured on eBay, she set out just before dawn. The goal was a mind-clearing treasure hunt to find speakeasies, restaurants, and former celeb residences: a bit of Roaring '20s magic to calm her soul. And she looked the part, wearing a full-length faux-fur coat over a slip dress (both thrifted and, if you looked closely, fairly worn). But it didn't take long for her to discover that most Old Harlem staples had been lost to time. An office building had taken over Hotel Theresa (oft frequented by Lena Horne and Cab Calloway, back when folks called it "the Waldorf Astoria of Harlem"). The Cotton Club was an apartment building. The Savoy, a cabaret once catering to the super elite, was now a supermarket.

Harlem was a modern neighborhood superimposed over an old one. But in the negative spaces, if she looked hard enough, Ricki could make out the contours of a ghost city. It was in the art nouveau flourishes of architecture. And the brass plaques unceremoniously affixed to humble buildings, declaring that Billie Holiday was discovered here or that Josephine Baker danced there.

These subtle nudges from the past reminded her that

giants had once

walked these streets. That beneath the 2024 version of the city was an enchanted universe—characters, places, and faces suspended in time like Pompeii. But as romantic as it was to imagine Old Harlem's glory days— and Lord knew Ricki loved nothing more than to romanticize everything—it filled her with melancholy. So much had been lost either to gentrification or to the natural passing of time. Standing outside of 169 West 133rd Street, she wondered how many passersby knew that the Nest Community Health Center was once simply the Nest, one of the first and rowdiest speakeasies in town.

Ricki consulted the description on her vintage map. Apparently, the Nest had featured showgirls dressed as birds (odd fetish, but hell, there was a lid for every pot), and both Bessie Smith and Ma Rainey had been in-house singers. It sounded dazzling.

And then she had an idea. A stroke of genius.

Even though her most expensive stock wasn't selling, Ricki couldn't bear to throw it away. She'd been carrying around those designs in her brain forever. Meticulously sourced tropical flowers, high-concept arrangements, and they were too special, too one of a kind to be discarded. Especially her latest, a kaleidoscopic arrangement of dahlias, orchids, lamb's ears, asclepiads, and rosemary.

Later that day, during her lunch break, she wrapped up the bundle in delicate pale yellow tissue paper, tied pink twine around it, and ornamented it with a #WILDETHINGS sticker. Ricki carried the bouquet back to the community health center. She placed it on the doorstep with careful reverence—a gift to the hidden history of her adopted city. Then she snapped a shot for social media. The caption read: #WildeThings found at The Nest Community Health Center, formerly The Nest speakeasy.

A few hours later, during a slow moment at the shop, Ricki was absentmindedly scrolling her IG. Her post already had over four hundred likes! An hour later, it was up to one thousand. The more she looked, the more the likes kept rolling in, at warp speed. And the comments!

@pressed.and.highly.flavored My great-great-aunt told me about the Nest. When she was a teenager, she’d sneak out the house and shake her &ss on tables. She

danced in early talkies, too! Check her out in this Youtube clip…

@b00tswiththefur Ever heard of Gladys Bentley, the 1920s drag king? She owned a gay speakeasy back in the day, but I can't find the address anywhere. Marlene Dietrich and Anna May Wong were always up in there. She deserves her flowers, too!

@imma_rage_quit I nanny for a family near your shop! Wilde Things looks so dope, sis. I'm stopping in today. Full disclosure, I don't need flowers right now, I'm just starved for adult conversation

A tiny, passionate community had clustered around Ricki's post—and it felt exhilarating. It felt like validation.

And so she did the same with another arrangement that didn't sell: a florid dream of alstroemeria sprays, strawflowers, hypericum berries, and poppies. She set this bouquet at the entrance of 2294½ Adam Clayton Powell Jr. Boulevard. It used to be Smalls Paradise, Old Harlem's only Black-owned cabaret, where 1920s waiters danced with serving trays on their heads, and 1940s waiters included a hustler called Detroit Red, who hadn't yet become Malcolm X. It was now an IHOP. She rested the flowers under the blue awning, blew it a kiss, and snapped an IG pic. The caption read: #WildeThings found at IHOP, formerly Smalls Paradise.

This time, the post hit one thousand likes within the hour. The comments section was lively. And by 3:00 p.m., she'd sold bouquets to three new customers. Even more thrilling, the nearby nanny actually showed up, and, as warned, she didn't buy anything, but Ricki definitely managed to make a new friend in the neighborhood.

And *then*. Soon after that second post, a drop-dead sexy couple rushed into Wilde Things with a request. George Gabowski was a superstar makeup artist whose contouring

talents were celebrated among pop stars, models, influencers, and Tuesday. His fiancé, Daniel MacClure, was a *Mayflower* descendant with a thriving wealth management practice and an expensive ex-wife. It was an emergency. The two had planned a chic

Valentine’s Day wedding, but their florist had bailed at the last minute due to creative differences regarding a flower crown for George’s pygmy goat. Every florist in town had their hands full with Valentine’s Day. The couple was desperate.

The dazzling blond duo was highly photographed, charitable, and extremely social. Their big day needed to be iconic! Fabulous flowers were essential.

George had been a follower of Ricki’s posts since her early @BOTANYFLOWERSLATELY days and thought her two Harlem history posts were clever and cool. Her maximalist aesthetic was exactly their taste. He wanted her flowers for the wedding, and he wouldn’t take no for an answer.

Suddenly, Ricki had only one week to pull off the biggest job of her life.

CHAPTER 9

THINGS COULD GET DANGEROUS

February 7–14, 2024

Ezra and Ricki agreed to ignore each other. In January, Ricki had had no idea who Ezra was. In February, she saw him everywhere. In fact, she'd run into him daily since their second encounter at the community garden.

Ricki ran into him while perusing the business aisle at Sister's Uptown Bookstore with Ms. Della. She was in line behind him to pick up red velvet waffles at Chocolat. One morning, she and Tuesday collided with him while en route to get manicures.

Sometimes, Ricki would sense his presence in the vicinity before he noticed she was there. Other times, she'd feel him watching her from a distance, the weight of his gaze warming her skin. Each time, their reaction was always the same: Ricki would gasp in shock, Ezra would flinch with surprise, and then the bumbling awkwardness would set in.

"Oh, uh, s-sorry, you go first. No, I'll go… Okay, you, bye," they'd mutter before bolting in opposite directions.

Ricki even tried to think ahead. Instead of going to her usual grocery store, she walked twenty blocks to visit an out-of-the-way organic market. When she reached for the door, she could feel resistance. Someone was pulling on the other side. She yanked, and the other person yanked back.

She stopped, her hands on her hips. Of fucking course Ezra Walker bounded through the door with a bag of avocados.

Impossible! But it was intriguing, too. Ricki didn't want to admit it, but she was becoming addicted to the possibility of running into him. The buzzing anticipation, the frantic surprise. Each time, their meeting felt like a breathless high, and then she fell into a dull low until the next time she saw him. Ricki had no time for this emotional roller coaster. She had to produce wedding florals in basically five minutes.

The day before the wedding, Tuesday and Ms. Della had to drag Ricki from her flower-strewn workstation for brunch at Melba's Restaurant. Good thing, as Ricki was so swamped, she'd barely eaten in thirty-six hours.

"I need to redo the boutonnieres and the table sprays," said Ricki. She'd stayed up all night crafting arrangements, and she had the frayed nerves to prove it. "I can't finish in time!"

"Well, now. Can't never could," said Ms. Della, the queen of Southern platitudes. She'd just dyed her teeny-weeny Afro a shocking pink, checking off the first bullet on her bucket list. With her caftans and huge designer glasses, she looked like an edgy art gallerist.

"For my first event, this is *big*," said Ricki. "A wedding at Bar Exquise?
Everyone will be there."

Bar Exquise was a swanky two-story restaurant that had opened a few years ago in an underfunded part of town, changing the neighborhood overnight. Steel-and-glass high-rises replaced low-income housing, potholes were filled in, and an explosion of organic baby boutiques opened to serve trust fundies and French-speaking digital nomads.

"Perfect venue for a glamorous, bisexual, bi-generational couple like Daniel and George," said Tuesday. "Very New Harlem chic."

"Exactly. I can't miss a detail." Ricki was eating a fried drumstick with a fork, as six of her fingers were bandaged

due to injuries sustained from thorns and scissors. “I don’t know if I’m ready to pull off an actual society event.”

Ricki knew that she could produce exquisite arrangements. Her confidence in her design skills was unwavering—she’d always had an

innate eye for color, texture, and design. She approached her daily personal style as an art project. And whereas sometimes her words failed her, she had always been able to express herself visually.

But it was the scale of the event, the social pulse of it, the flashiness, that made her nervous. As a Wilde, she grew up attending endless balls and galas, and she was used to all eyes being on her. Admiring eyes, enthralled by the business titan and his glamorous family. A veritable parade of first Blacks! First Black valedictorian of Willowbrook Prep. First Black girl crowned Miss Georgia Teen. First Black student body president at Cornell University. First Black chairwoman of the Junior League of Atlanta. First Black treasurer of the American Business Association. And then when those admiring eyes would fall on her, she'd wilt under the weight of the judgment.

There's the little one—she's never been a first Black anything. Actually, that's not true; she was the first Black admitted into the New Hor-eye-zons Summer Camp, that rehab for ritzy teen sluts, where Carole banished her after she got bombed at Rae's wedding and vomited on Cookie Johnson's sequined Valentino! Pretty girl. It's a shame she's such a handful.

Historically, fancy events were nothing but an opportunity to be reminded of her inadequacies. The pressure to be perfect was stifling her. And it was more than the high standards she placed on herself; this wedding was about moving away from that old version of herself, the way people categorized her in her parents' fancy social circles. It would be a massive boon for her business. She wanted to be seen as more than the black sheep Wilde, the flighty handful. She wanted to be seen as a fully capable businesswoman.

She wondered if she'd ever move past the need to prove to the world (and herself) that she was good enough.

Stabbing a fork into her drumstick, she sighed, "These nuptials are above my pay grade, y'all. Why'd I say yes?"

"Because you currently have no pay grade," Tuesday reminded her.

“Oh, that’s right.” Ricki sat back in her chair, her eyes traveling to Ms. Della, who was taking a sip of coffee. Was she imagining things, or was Ms. Della trembling a bit more than usual? As she brought the cup up to her lips, her hand was so unsteady that she had to set it back down on the saucer.

It's early, thought Ricki. *Maybe she hasn't taken her meds yet. I'll ask her later.*

"I forgot, I brought gifts for you two." Ricki handed them bundles of artfully wrapped four-by-six-inch note cards, culled from the surplus of plantable seed paper she hadn't been able to sell at the shop. "Tuesday helped me make it from scratch. You bury it, and wildflowers grow."

Ms. Della smiled politely, then asked, "Now, why would I want to bury paper?"

Ricki sighed. "This is why my business is failing! I don't know what my clients want."

"Let me help you manage your creative expectations," started Tuesday, her Yankees brim pulled super low, shielding her recognizable face. "Do you identify as a Beyoncé or a Rihanna?"

"Mmm. Controversial question," Ricki remarked. "In terms of what, exactly?"

"Business personas. Rihanna creates art to please herself. If we hate it, we can fuck off. But Beyoncé cares. Every note, choreo, visuals, it's designed specifically to blow our minds."

Ricki thought it over, tucking her coils behind her ears. "I'm definitely a Beyoncé. I *want* people to love my work. How it's received matters to me."

"Which one's from Texas?" asked Ms. Della, tapping her manicure on her cup. Even if she wasn't certain who was who, she disliked being excluded from pop culture conversations.

"Beyoncé," responded Ricki and Tuesday. "No, no, I like the other one better."

The next table over, two women wearing identical knotless braids whipped their heads around to glare at Ms. Della. When they saw that she was an elder, they smiled respectfully and returned to their omelets.

Sorry, Ricki mouthed in their direction. The Hive was everywhere. "Now that girl's a businesswoman," continued Ms. Della. "A hardworking young lady who saved waitressing tips to open

her own Creole restaurant? A shame she had to kiss a frog to land that handsome Arabian fella, but no one said it'd be easy."

Ricki glanced at Tuesday, who was pursing her lips to stifle the giggles. "Ms. Della, that's not Rihanna, that's *Tiana*."

"Who?"

Ricki raised her voice a bit. “Princess Tiana, ma’am! The Disney heroine?”

“Well, now, who can keep up? Y’all talk so fast.” She waved her hand impatiently.

“Here’s the other thing,” said Ricki, moving on. “It’s embarrassing to admit, but I struggle at big events. I’m not the most graceful socializer.”

“You’re comfy with your customers,” Tuesday pointed out. “Well, the few you’ve had.”

Ms. Della grimaced.

“That’s flower chitchat,” pointed out Ricki. “I could pontificate about plants all day. But small talk? I get nervous and babble about my micro- obsessions. Y’all probably never noticed.”

Tuesday laughed at this, digging into her eggnog waffles. “Never noticed? I witnessed you lecture an Uber driver on the ways inbreeding affected the appearance of European royals.”

“Google 'Habsburg jaw,’” whispered Ricki. “It’s nuts.”

Ms. Della had heard enough. “Listen to me, young lady. Don’t worry about this wedding, you hear me? You’ll do just fine. No granddaughter of mine is a failure, you hear?”

Ricki sank into the warmth of these words. Elder love, elder approval, it was a new experience for Ricki, and it made her feel boundless. Invincible.

She planned to keep Ms. Della’s voice in her head during the wedding, as a mantra for good luck.

It worked. Not only did she finish all the florals in time, she fucking killed it.

The black-tie wedding ceremony had taken over the top floor of Bar Exquise (the bottom floor, a live performance lounge, was closed for renovation). Ricki had transformed the space into an elegant wintry dreamscape, with arrangements of snowy blossoms, frosted greenery, and ivory candelabras, and centered on every table was a glorious tangle of white orchids and birch branches (onto which she’d hand-painted delicate red hearts as a valentine

to each of the guests). And now the sweet ceremony had transitioned to a rowdy, champagne-soaked reception.

It was exactly what she needed to take her mind off Ezra.

Ezra, she thought, fussing with a droopy orchid as guests swilled curated craft cocktails and bopped to dance pop. *Mysterious Ezra. Who tries this hard to avoid someone, only to see them all the time?*

Ricki didn't believe in coincidences.

Tuesday, in a strapless gold mermaid gown and crimson lips, came sweeping over to Ricki. "Why so intense? You did it! Aren't you proud?"

"Extremely," Ricki said, beaming, as she jolted out of her Ezra daze. This ruminating and fantasizing was becoming almost constant—and a nuisance. She was starting to imagine seeing him in places he clearly wasn't
—a man mirage. When the deejay first walked in, Ricki had actually done a double take, even though he was five inches shorter than Ezra. And Surinamese.

"The flowers are so glam," raved Tuesday. "And so are you, you saucy bitch."

Ricki, admittedly, did feel pretty. She'd poured herself into a backless, plunging 1930s gown the color of crushed cranberries, topping it off with berry-stained lips and a hibiscus tucked behind an ear.

"Mysterious femme fatale was the mood board," purred Ricki, with a slinky pose.

"Femme fatale, yes. But you're too heart-on-your-sleeve to be mysterious. It's part of your charm," said Tuesday, gesturing at a waiter, who appeared with a tray of cocktails.

Ricki took one and then watched her friend grab two.

"I'm not judging," she whispered, "but I thought you were sober?"

"I'm *child star* sober," replied Tuesday, downing one glass. "No heroin." "Ah. Noted."

"Remember when I told you I get horny when I'm tipsy? I have a crush on the best man, and I need him to love me back. But only for the duration of the reception."

"Why not for longer?"

"No time!" she whisper-screamed. "My plate is full!"

"Tuesday Rowe. Your only plans this week are avoiding writing chapter four, and administering several at-home

facial peels.”

“Nurturing my complexion is more rewarding than nurturing a relationship,” she said, downing the other glass. “Oh, look. That’s him.”

Tuesday pointed out a forty-something guy with a dad bod and sparsely

attended beard, bobbing his head to the beat. He looked like a rental car agent.

"He's… cute?" gushed Ricki.

"I like 'em schlubby, baby. Dowdy in the streets, rowdy in the sheets." Ricki burst out laughing.

"I'd offer him *all* my orifices without a *shred* of dignity. Let's go entice him."

She tried to drag Ricki to the dance floor, but she protested, claiming it was an unprofessional look. Truthfully, Ricki hadn't let herself dance in public since her escapades at Rae's wedding twelve years ago. In her defense, she'd downed that bottle of Mad Dog only to combat her paralyzing party nerves. It was the most important moment of Rae's life, and she wanted to be a social success for her! To make her sister proud, for once. But alas, she was only sixteen and not an experienced drinker. She went from "pleasantly tipsy" to "911" within fifteen minutes. She remembered that before blacking out completely, she sloppily twerked on the president of the mid-Atlantic chapter of Jack and Jill, a preppy twelfth grader who was distantly related to both Thurgood Marshall *and* Al Roker. The damage was done. And no one's memory was longer than the Black elite's.

Can't one thing ever be easy with you? Carole had wailed before dropping Ricki off at rehab for the summer and then convalescing for three weeks at Canyon Ranch spa.

Dance floors were on Ricki's no-go list.

By the time it got to that late-stage part of a reception when everyone's self-consciousness had evaporated—heels flung off, hair frizzy, ties loosened—the deejay was playing throwback Britney Jean Spears, and Tuesday was grinding on her crush. Ricki observed them having fun, on the outside of the good time. It was an isolating, melancholy feeling. She wondered what it'd be like to be on the outside of things *with* someone. A person who understood how it felt to be unable to join in. A guy who was cool with it and willing to stand with her in their own private quiet.

And then, out of nowhere, Ricki heard… something.

It was a faraway tune, softly playing beneath “Toxic.” It was a song she’d heard before but couldn’t quite remember.

She stopped dancing and cocked her head.

She could hear the piano. And the melody was so familiar. Extremely catchy. What…

Ricki's eyes flew open. "Thank You for Being a Friend." Coming from where, though?

To her left, she heard a guy yell to his date, "It's *Golden Girls*! You hear it, right?"

Across the dance floor, somebody sang along: *"And if you threw a party, invited everyone you knew…"*

And then the dance floor exploded with drunken delight. The deejay stopped his music, and everyone started warbling off-key to the unseen piano.

Who was playing this banger of a theme song? And why? No one knew! And it didn't matter. It was unexpected, spontaneous, and silly, all the elements of a good time.

Just as abruptly as the *Golden Girls* theme started, it changed… to the theme song from *The Jeffersons*. From there, the piano switched to the *Gilligan's Island* theme. And then those of *The Flintstones*, *The Facts of Life*, *A Different World*, and *The Sopranos*. The crowd roared each time, happily singing off-key.

The piano switched to the *Good Times* theme. And maybe it was because Ricki was the only sober one in the room, but she just couldn't get over the collective absurdity of one hundred socialites in black tie scream- singing *"Scratchin' and survivin' good times!"*

Intrigued, she went still and listened, attempting to isolate the piano sounds. They were coming from downstairs. Unable to resist her curiosity, Ricki hiked up her gown and flew out of the exit and down a stairwell to the first floor. The whole place was midconstruction, a mess.

She followed the music to a large raised performance platform by the window. In the center of the platform was a piano. And behind the piano was Ezra Walker, his face euphoric as he banged out an indulgent high- gospel version of the *CSI* theme, to screams from upstairs.

"IT'S YOU," exclaimed Ricki, throwing her hands up. *"Whyyyy?"*

Stunned out of his reverie, Ezra looked up and stopped

playing, snatching his hands away like the keys were on fire. Through the vent, they heard the crowd upstairs erupt in boos.

“Nooo.” With a long-suffering groan, Ezra buried his face in his hands.

“No. No. No.”

“Why on this godforsaken dying earth are you everywhere?” Ricki demanded. “And why are you playing this unhinged medley from hell?”

“There’s a wedding upstairs?” “Oh please! Don’t act clueless.”

“I really didn’t know,” he insisted. “One of my favorite BBQ spots used to be over here. I was looking for it, and it’s gone. Replaced by a spot called Hüd Snacks that sells gourmet versions of Funyuns and honey buns at twenty-five dollars a pop.”

“You must be joking. Are the owners…”

“Of course.” Ezra rolled his eyes. “Anyway, the cleaning woman let me in. I was walking back home, and I saw this piano in the window. I can’t walk by a piano without playing it, just to test out the tone, projection, clarity. It’s a fucking compulsion.” He grimaced. “Apologies.”

Confused, Ricki said, “Why are you apologizing?”

“I don’t like to curse in front of women,” he said simply.

She drew back a little, surprised. “Why, because we’re delicate creatures? The weaker sex? You have some regressive attitudes about women.”

“What I have,” he said, “is manners. It’s how I was raised.” She narrowed her eyes a bit.

“That’s oddly old school.”

“What kind of men you been around?” He huffed out a quick exhale. “Anyway, the true test of an instrument is if it sounds good when you play a corny song. And I watch a lot of TV,” he said. “I was about to play *Moesha* next. Wanna hear it?”

She stared at him for a beat, incredulous. He looked at her from head to toe, a quick, furtive glance. He blinked hard, as if Ricki’s mere presence— and her mere presence in that knockout glamazon gown—had scrambled his brain.

“So. We know why I’m here.” He clasped his hands on his lap. “Why are you here?”

“I designed the flowers for the wedding upstairs.” Ricki gathered the skirt of her gown in one hand and stepped up

onto the platform. She peered down at him threateningly. “And I know exactly why I’m avoiding you, but I’m still fuzzy on why you’re avoiding me.”

“I told you, I’m a private person with reclusive tendencies.”

“Are you in the CIA?”

“How you figure I’m in the CIA?” asked Ezra, slipping into the country cadence she’d noticed in the garden. “If I were a spy, I couldn’t tell you.”

“Are you married?”

“No sane woman would marry me.”

She sucked her teeth, because they both knew that was ridiculous. His towering frame and intense, blazing eyes could turn the coldest stoic to mush.

Ezra’s physicality was lodged permanently in her brain.

“And why aren’t you marriage material?” she asked, lifting her chin imperiously.

“I’m. Reclusive.” He emphasized each word. “And when I’m not at home, I’m on the road, gigging. Not marketable on the dating apps.”

She let out a frustrated huff. “Look, I’m staying away from you to avoid trouble. But you? You look actually… frightened when you see me. Why is that?”

He chewed the inside of his mouth, looking irresistibly casual in good jeans, Vans, and a wrinkled, high-quality flannel, the kind of shirt you wished a guy would forget in your bedroom. Ricki struggled mightily not to stare, and then she zeroed in on his big, beautiful, long-fingered hands. He clenched his fists over the piano keys, and she tried to ignore the faint outline of muscle under his shirt. Absentmindedly, he began to play a tune. The melody was hauntingly stirring. Ricki wanted to hear more. But as suddenly as he started, he stopped.

“You ever seen a tornado?”

Ricki shook her head. “No, not outside of *Twister*. Have you?”

“No, but… folks say that if you’re in the presence of a tornado and it looks still, that means it’s heading right towards you.”

“I have no idea what that means.” She paused a bit. “Though the trivia connoisseur in me finds this information compelling.”

“You’re the tornado, ma’am.”

“And you’re speaking in riddles, sir.”

“When I first saw you, everything went still.” He met her gaze. And what she saw in his eyes was pure, raw yearning. It knocked the wind out of her, and it was completely at odds with what he was saying.

“Still and calm,” he continued in his deep, rolling drawl, not breaking

eye contact. “Like a tornado, before it completely decimates you.”

Ricki’s mouth dropped open. “But… but I’m not a natural disaster! I’m a poised, respectable woman! I’m from Buckhead, for fuck’s sake!”

The corner of his mouth curled upward. “Mm-hmm. You’re the picture of poise.”

She glowered with frustration.

“I’m not scared of you,” he said. “I’m scared of us.”

Ricki’s confusion was growing by the second. “But there is no us.” “Right. And let’s keep it that way.”

“More riddles.” Ricki rolled her eyes. “Listen, don’t flatter yourself. What makes you think that I even want there to be an us? Do you really think I find you that irresistible?”

Ezra’s expression didn’t change, but his eyes flashed with heat and mischief. Wordlessly, his gaze slowly went from her eyes to her mouth and farther down to the deep plunge of her scandalously clingy crimson gown. Her body, as if absorbing the electric charge of their conversation, was practically draped on the piano, the soft swell of her breasts overflowing, the curve of her hip popped in lusty flirtation. She oozed sex. Blatant, lascivious, fuck-me sex.

“Your thoughts are loud,” he noted wryly.

She felt searing mortification. *This is the second time tonight I’ve heard that my emotions are transparent*, she thought. Quickly, she stepped back from the piano, smoothing her hair and adjusting her dress. Her cheeks were on fire. She didn’t remember the last time a man had so utterly thrown her off her game. Actually—had a man *ever* thrown her off her game?

“God,” she muttered through clenched teeth.

Ezra couldn’t have hidden the smirk if he’d tried (and he hadn’t tried). “You a believer?”

“In God?” Disarmed and flustered by the abrupt conversation shift, she said, “Oh. I… I don’t know. I was raised in fire-and-brimstone Catholicism, which doesn’t appeal to me at all. I don’t believe in the traditional, male-ego-centered God. But there’s a force larger than us out

there. I don’t know what to call it. It’s just… an Energy. With a capital *E*.”

“So when extraordinary things happen to you, you don’t thank God, you thank Energy?”

She huffed out a small laugh. Just like in the garden, Ricki noticed that

she and Ezra got deep, fast. This was unexplored terrain: sharing philosophical musings with a man.

“When I’m in nature, especially the woods, I feel protected by something 'other.’ Something old, before humans, before religion. One time, I wandered a bit too deep into the forest behind my parents’ home, and there were no people anywhere. Just trees, flowers, endless sky. It could’ve been that day or a thousand years ago. And I felt a presence so weighty, I panicked. I wanted to run. It’s a natural human response, you know, the panic you feel when you’re alone in overwhelming nature. The word comes from Pan, the Greek god of the wild.”

The Greek god of the wild? she thought. *STOP. TALKING.* Meanwhile, Ezra was taking this in, obviously delighted. “Your brain,” he said, “must be a fascinating place to visit.”

“Actually, it’s a bottomless well of useless trivia.” How was Ezra able to break down her guard so easily? “If you’ve got time, I could expound upon early Black vaudevillians, fictional languages, the Kennedy curse, and Alice Walker and Tracy Chapman’s secret romance.”

A slow burn of a smile brightened Ezra’s face. “Useless trivia? Useless to who? Clearly you just never found the right audience.”

Ricki didn’t know what to say. She felt exposed and silly but also sweetly validated in a way she never had. She busied herself adjusting her cocktail ring.

“The Kennedy curse isn’t an urban legend, by the way. Old man Joe made a deal with the devil,” he said. “And I know a lot about Black vaudevillians. Coupla Ezra Walkers before me were music men, too.”

“Seriously?”

“Seriously. I come from a long line of troubadours. And in terms of fictional languages, I know Klingon and High Valyrian. A little Huttese. Some Elvish.”

“You’re a fantasy bro?” She gasped. “How’d I miss that? I can usually tell by the shoes.”

“But I didn’t know about Alice and Tracy. Feels right, though.” He paused, seeming to wrestle with something

internally. Then, almost shyly, he asked, “Would you like to sit down?”

He stood up and pulled out the bench for her, sweeping off the construction debris with his hands. He carefully laid his coat on the bench

so she wouldn't dirty her gown. Ezra brought such a level of care to every word and movement that being in his presence made her feel taken care of, too. Protected. Secure. Which was surprising to Ricki, given the strange nature of their connection. Endeared, she sat down.

They both stared down at their hands, not sure what to do next.

Ezra spoke first. "So, when you got that panicky feeling in the woods, did you run?"

"Hell no, how could I? I was communing with the divine." She smiled wistfully, remembering. "I guess I'm not frightened by what I don't understand."

"I think the divine is everywhere," said Ezra. "The world's so much more than what we catch with our five senses. And most people don't even bother to catch the obvious. The crowd upstairs? They heard music coming from nowhere, but you were the only one to investigate."

"I'm demonstrably nosy," she whispered. "I know," he whispered back.

"Can I admit something?" she asked. "I'm glad I found you. Parties make me panic."

"They do?" Ezra looked surprised. "Why?"

"My family's very social. I grew up going to galas and fancy dinners.
I'm terrible at it."

"That's hard to imagine."

"It's true. I can't relax, too afraid of people seeing me. Judging me. Deciding that I don't deserve my family name, the looks, the privilege." And then she divulged her truest, scariest thought. "I'm afraid that I don't belong anywhere. Do you ever feel like that?"

She looked at Ezra, her eyes wide with vulnerability.

"Every day," he admitted. "I look like something I'm not. And I never feel at home."

Ezra glanced back at her, his expression open. Tender.

They fell into contemplative silence, two unknowable people who understood each other, almost too easily.

"Why do you think we keep running into each other?"

asked Ricki. “Is it a leap year thing? Like you said, every fourth February, things get weird.”

“It’s more than that.” Intensity darkened his brow. “Things could get dangerous, Ricki.”

Ezra says my name like he's said it before, alone, to himself. He says it like he likes the taste of it. Like it's some forbidden, private pleasure.

Ezra's gaze on Ricki melted her to liquid. She blinked slowly, meeting his eyes. They drank each other in, indulgently—for how long, Ricki didn't know. When they were together, time seemed to stretch and bend, like they were lost in their own private world. Here in this dusty, half-constructed space, they were eons away from the noise upstairs.

After a few moments, Ezra lazily began stroking the keys, a smooth, fluid motion. It was a snippet of whatever he'd started playing before. The notes settled over Ricki's skin like satin, raising goose bumps and quickening her heartbeat. It sounded familiar, like she already knew it in her bones, while it also felt otherworldly.

"What… what are you playing? It's beautiful."

Before Ezra could answer, the back door opened and shut with a loud BAM. Heels were clicking across the floor, followed by someone else shuffling behind.

"FUCK ME, NOT YOU AGAIN!" Tuesday hollered at Ezra, streaming toward the piano in a furious blur of gold lamé, her new crush trailing behind her. Ezra and Ricki bolted off the bench. Tuesday stopped at the platform, chest heaving. Her guy held her steady by the shoulders. *"Why are you stalking Ricki? Leave her alone!"*

Ricki rushed to Tuesday's side. "Calm down! I'm fine, I promise!"

Tuesday pointed an acrylic nail at Ezra. "My girl doesn't realize you're a creep, 'cause she's a sheltered suburban girl. I'm not, though. I *will* fight a nigga."

"You will?" asked her new guy nervously.

Ezra glanced in his direction. "Rethinking the past half hour, huh?"

Incensed, Tuesday made a move to lunge toward him, but Ricki held her back.

"Tuesday, stop. Don't do this, not during Black History Month. We'll talk later, okay?"

"Anything you need to say, you can say it in front of

Bruce," announced Tuesday.

"Pleasure's mine, Bruce." Ezra offered his hand, and Bruce shook it with gusto.

"I apologize on behalf of my lady," Bruce responded sheepishly.

“Nah, you good, fella,” he said amiably. “Well, I best skedaddle. Y’all have a good night, now.”

Ezra glanced once in Ricki’s direction. Something torrid flashed in his eyes, and then he headed for the door. She watched him through the window, unable to resist, as this enigma disappeared around the corner to God knew where. For someone who wasn’t scared of the things she didn’t understand, Ricki was shaken.

Bruce was also watching Ezra, brow furrowed. “Did he just say 'skedaddle’?”

“There’s something off about that kid,” said Tuesday. “He looks retro. He has the face of a person who’s never ordered Door-Dash or been on Microsoft Teams.”

“Have *you* ever been on Microsoft Teams?” asked Ricki. Heart pounding, she was barely following what Tuesday was saying. She was still reeling from the way Ezra seemed to understand the parts of her she was used to hiding. She’d never found that in a man, and she’d never expected to.

“WAIT,” continued Tuesday, swaying a bit. Bruce steadied her elbow. “You told me that Ezra claims he bought the painting because he likes to support young artists. But does he even know who painted the portrait? Has he ever mentioned Ali’s name? Even once?”

No, he hadn’t. Ricki tried to remember who had paid her for the portrait. Someone had given her the cash and Ezra’s phone number… Who was it? She sort of remembered a person entering Sweet Colette at the end of the party, but it was blurry, like an image reposted over and over, progressively losing clarity over time.

Ricki couldn’t hold on to the thought.

And days later, she’d forgotten that she’d forgotten there’d ever been a person at all.

CHAPTER 10

NIGHT COMPANY

February 15, 2024

After closing the next day, Ricki went straight upstairs to Ms. Della's for their weekly tea. She'd missed last week due to Ms. Della's doctor's appointment, so they hadn't had quality alone time in a while. As Ms. Della was her therapist, emotional touchstone, and sole voice of reason, Ricki was sorely missing her.

The elder woman knew everything about everything, and what she didn't care to learn about, she dismissed as inconsequential. Ricki thought this was an extremely anti-stress way to live. Why let something insignificant occupy space in your brain? The woman was born in 1927. She'd seen almost a century of human nature. She could not be convinced of an air fryer's value, nor did she care to discern the difference between AOC, RBG, TMI, and an IUD. Which was fine. She had a beautiful home, mental clarity, and the energy (and muscle tone) of women half her age. What else was there?

Ricki needed to inject some of this no-nonsense practicality into her veins.

Wilde Things was revving up, slowly but surely. The day after Valentine's Day was notoriously brutal on florists, candy shops, and department stores, but after Ricki's stunning arrangements at the wedding, she'd clocked five

orders—expensive ones. Even still, she had in-store

bouquets that she couldn't sell, which she was learning was a sad reality of floral retail. Per her new tradition, Ricki laid her bouquets at Old Harlem addresses and kept it moving. She left a bouquet at 224 West 135th Street, the original 1909 offices of the NAACP, which were now a beauty salon, then another at 2227 Adam Clayton Powell Jr. Boulevard, formerly Lafayette Theatre, once showcasing world-famous vaudeville acts, now under construction for condos.

Each new flower post, brilliantly art-directed at a long-dead landmark, was garnering her a thousand more likes than the one before. They weren't simply flower shots; they were odes to slices of Black history. The posts were starting to get reposted on every social platform. Selling the flowers would've been ideal, of course, but Ricki told herself that the social media marketing was invaluable.

And as her following steadily grew, she pushed herself more and more, designing until her eyes crossed.

A part of her hoped that the harder she worked, the more distance she'd place between herself and the gnawing ache to solve the mystery of Ezra. To know him. It was a sickness with a cure teasingly, maddeningly out of reach. She hated getting this worked up over a man who wasn't even her man. But there was no denying it. She had it bad.

"Ooh, you've got it bad," announced Ms. Della, confirming Ricki's suspicions.

"I know," she sighed, sinking into her favorite armchair. She took a sip of chamomile tea from Ms. Della's elegant Wedgwood cup. "And I don't even know him. All I know is he's intense, mysterious, and… really kind."

"Look at you! Grinning like a possum."

"He has beautiful manners, a true old-school gentleman. And Ms. Della, he's *fine*." Her eyes went hazy a little, then she frowned. "Maybe I'm just ovulating." She paused. "But even though we've only spoken in-depth twice, each time it's like three conversations in one. I've never revealed so much to a man so quickly. You know when you're up late at night, reading, and the lines between reality and the book get fuzzy, time becomes elastic, and you fade into the story?"

“Lord, chile. What books are you reading?”

“That’s what it feels like, talking to him. Like a hazy, heightened experience. And afterwards, my head is spinning. I can’t figure any of it

out."

"Maybe he's not someone to figure out. He's someone to *experience*." Ms. Della winked. Her pink hair color had been a brilliant decision. The woman looked fantastic, except that she really did seem to be trembling more than usual. She raised her hands to adjust the shoulders of her caftan, and her hands shook so much, the movement sent ripples down the fabric.

"Are you feeling all right, Ms. Della? Do you want a straw, maybe?"

Ms. Della's eyebrows shot to the ceiling. "A straw? With a teacup? I might as well go swimming with a bicycle."

"I just noticed you were shaking quite a bit," said Ricki gently. "Have you eaten today?"

"I'm fine, dear," she said curtly.

She instantly regretted opening her mouth. Ms. Della was proud of her physical strength and health, and Ricki never wanted to offend her. Plus, Ms. Della had a wide support network of friends who she saw and spoke to regularly. She wasn't in danger of getting sick unnoticed.

Just then, a patently adorable, round, and rosy-cheeked woman burst into the room with a tray of oven-fresh cinnamon scones. Absolutely slaying her bucket list, Ms. Della had met her new girlfriend, Suyin Fong, at a seventy-plus senior lesbians mixer, and they'd bonded over their love of Lola Falana, backgammon, and baking shows. At seventy-seven, she was a younger lady but so interesting that Ms. Della happily looked past the improper age difference. Suyin had left her family and Chinatown at seventeen, go-go danced at lesbian bars, marched for freedom, become a civil rights lawyer, and helped found the Lesbian Herstory Archives. These days, however, she was focused solely on wooing Ms. Della and mastering her baking lessons.

The wooing, she'd perfected. Baking, not so much.

"*Et voilà*, my latest! Cinnamon-maple scones. Do you love them?" Suyin beamed as her new girlfriend and Ricki each selected a pastry from her tray.

"Delicious, Auntie Su," exclaimed Ricki after biting into

a bitter, unmixed ball of flour.

"Scrumptious," raved Ms. Della, gracefully swallowing down her bite with a mighty sip of chamomile tea. "You've been so busy in the kitchen, Su. Why don't you sit with us?"

“No, no, no, I know this is your special time. Keep talking—I have a cherry-bacon tart in the oven. I’ll be back, Pinky.” She gave Ms. Della a sweet peck on the forehead. Then she disappeared into the kitchen, a plume of smoke wafting out of the door.

Ricki smiled. “Y’all are adorable.”

“That woman’s gonna burn down my house,” Ms. Della said with a sigh, besotted.

“But will it be worth it?”

The elder woman smiled bashfully, the lines around her eyes deepening. “Between you, me, and the walls, I think Su is the cat’s pajamas.” She pointed at the TV screen with a shaky finger. “Would you believe she convinced me to watch a program about Jimi Hendrix instead of *Great British Bake Off*? She’s still a hippie, you know.”

“You weren’t into Jimi in the ’60s?”

“That hooligan?” she said. “No, I liked Dionne Warwick. Barbra Streisand, Aretha. They were so elegant. Look at him! He looks like he’d steal your car clean out from under you!”

And that was exactly what Ricki thought made him so sexy. Giggling, she glanced at the HBO documentary on the screen. A *Rolling Stone* music critic was explaining how Hendrix came up with the “Voodoo Chile” lyrics. “Legend has it,” said the critic, “he was at the Scene in New York City, hanging at the bar. Some guy sat next to him, singing something about some old girlfriend who did voodoo, and the moon turning red. Jimi liked the psychedelic sound of it and scribbled the phrases on a napkin. When asked, Jimi couldn’t remember who the man was. Crazy to think that some anonymous cat’s responsible for the greatest blues-rock refrain of all time.”

Ricki sighed, bewitched by this backstory. “I always loved 'Voodoo Chile’—it’s so sexy. Voodoo symbolism was huge in early jazz and blues songs. This must be a nod to that tradition.”

From the other room, Su shouted, “Exactly! Jimi played good ole Delta blues, but on acid!”

Ms. Della smiled fondly in the direction of the kitchen.

Then she whispered to Ricki, “Yesterday, during my nightly chat with Dr. Bennett, I told him about Su. I think he’d approve.”

“Of course he would. Wherever he is now, I’m sure he wants you to be happy.”

“Surely,” she agreed. “Also, there’s no competition, you understand. I’ll love my Dr. Bennett forever. Till the seas rise to take us. Su feels the same about her wife, who passed four years ago. So we’re not serious. There’s a difference between Big Love and a wonderful time.”

“You’re having a wonderful time?” asked Ricki, with a wink.

“Hold your horses, now. Su’s got a bad hip. I’ve got arthritis. Neither one of us is in a position to accept… *night company*.”

“Night company!”

“But we’re not platonic. She brushes against my arm and I feel things. And she’s researching Russian bathhouses for me. First three bucket list items checked.”

Beaming, Ricki rose out of her chair and sat next to Ms. Della on the couch, flinging her arms around her. She was awed by this ninety-six-year- old’s determination.

“You’re my hero, you know that?”

“You’re mine, dear! Moving to a big city out of the clear blue to follow your dreams? I envy your moxie. You’ve done what we couldn’t do, back in my day. You should be proud.”

Ricki squeezed her tighter, overcome with emotion. How could she be Ms. Della’s hero, when Ms. Della had lived such a long, extraordinary life? Ricki felt special, chosen. But she also understood that to Ms. Della, a product of her time, Ricki’s independence and ambition must seem like an extraordinary gift.

“You know, dear, I sometimes wonder what mark I will have left on the world when I go. What was my purpose here? I’m not so sure. I should figure that out soon, I reckon. No one ever knows how much time is left.”

Ricki was silent, grasping for something to say. Why was Ms. Della talking like this? Sure, she was closer to death than not, but Ricki had never heard her speak so candidly about the end of her life.

And then Ms. Della coughed, a racking, painful sound, and Ricki drew away to give her space. She coughed again —one, two, three, four times, into her elbow. “I declare! My tea must’ve gone down the wrong pipe.”

Ms. Della hadn’t touched her cup in at least five minutes.

“Back to what I was saying,” she continued, her voice scratchy. “Don’t misunderstand me; I’ve had a good life. I just wish I’d taken more chances.”

“Had a good life? Why are you speaking in past tense?”

“I’m ninety-six, dear,” she said with a knowing chuckle, sliding her oversized frames up her nose. “I could pass any time.”

It wasn’t until then that Ricki noticed three pill bottles in a wooden bowl on her coffee table. “Ms. Della, is that new medication?”

She waved her hands in a dismissive gesture. “Oh, it’s nothing alarming, just some pills to strengthen my old bones. Prevent osteoporosis, that sort of thing.” She smiled and patted Ricki on the thigh. “Enough about me. You need to find out more about this Ezra.”

Ricki sighed with her entire body. “Tuesday thinks he’s going to kidnap and kill me.”

“Well, now, no one’s ever had fun by actively trying not to get killed.” Ms. Della settled back into the couch. “Everything is a risk. Dr. Bennett and I were watching a horse race once. A dead vulture fell clean out of the sky at remarkable speed, knocking a jockey on the head and breaking the man’s neck.”

Ricki gawked. “A dead vulture?”

“Apparently, the bird suffered a fatal heart attack midflight.” Ms. Della shook her head at the tragedy while Ricki stared at her, wide-eyed. “And don’t you know that horse won the race? Galloped to first place with a dead jockey on his back.”

Ricki almost erupted in a spit take. “Ms. Della, you can’t be serious.” “Your generation makes such a commotion over those Marvelle pictures.

Please! *That* was entertainment.” She coughed harshly, which made her look vulnerable and fragile. Smaller, somehow. Closer to her age.

“Point being,” she continued, “you can’t predict your dying day, Ricki. And you can’t cheat it, either. If you want something? Get it while you can.”

From the kitchen, Suyin started belting out Janis Joplin’s “Get It While You Can.”

Ms. Della smiled, her eyes soft and fawning. “I do hope she’s paying attention to the oven. In any event, I want you

to stop making yourself crazy trying to understand this gentleman. Let’s toast to seeing where the adventure takes you.”

Ms. Della attempted to raise her teacup, but her shakes were too severe.

So she set it back down, and then Ricki clinked it with her cup.

“Cheers.”

Later, after Ms. Della and Suyin dropped unsubtle hints that it was time for them to watch *Cake Boss*, Ricki dragged herself downstairs to her apartment. Exhausted from the day, she peeled off all her New York-winter layers, leaving a trail of clothes from the hallway to her bedroom.

Finally, clad in only a white Hanes old man tank top and boy shorts, she turned on *Stevie Wonder’s Journey Through the Secret Life of Plants*. Her peace lilies needed some musical love; they were looking a little limp. And then she plunked herself down at her special square piano, not even bothering to turn on the lights. Ricki had practically stayed up all night working the past three days. She was damn near delirious with exhaustion.

Gingerly, Ricki laid her forehead against the closed piano lid. She slowly rolled her forehead back and forth against the smooth veneer of the old wood. As always, she marveled at how… comfortable… this spot was.

This piano had old stories in it—Harlem Renaissance stories—and it felt like the lives embedded in the grain of the wood were on her side, somehow. Soothing her, calming her. When Ricki sat there, she felt held.

I guess you don’t choose your favorite places, she thought. *They choose you.*

Tonight, she needed to be calmed. Saying how she felt about Ezra out loud to Ms. Della had knocked her sideways. Her skin was thrumming, her heart throbbing. Honestly, she’d never been so smitten, so swept away. It was a foreign concept; she’d never gotten lost in someone before. With Ezra, it didn’t feel like she had a choice. It felt like gravity pulling her down, down, down, and she was on the precipice of losing control.

When Ricki had told Ezra that she wasn’t afraid of what she didn’t understand, it was the truth. But she wasn’t satisfied with accepting that he was unknowable. Ricki ached to go deeper. She needed to.

Ezra had penetrated her thoughts.

With a languid sigh, Ricki sat up, pushing back the piano lid to expose the keys. Gently, she ran her fingers across them. She fingered a few, and they landed with an atonal thunk. She wished she could see Ezra play. Ricki imagined what his hands must look like in motion, working the ivories, coaxing them to sing. The mastery of it, the concentration.

Fuck, was the heat up too high? She laid her palm against her chest, her skin feeling sunburn hot and dewy with perspiration. You couldn't control the temperature in these old New York houses. The clanking hothouse radiators were part of the "charm." She swiped her forehead with the back of her hand and then unhooked her bra and pulled it through the armhole of her tank.

Ricki wondered where he'd trained and if he'd ever written music for a woman. (Come on, of course he had.) Had the woman been worth it? Had she wept at the gesture? His skill? The beauty? Was Ezra careful with his power? Or did he seduce for fun? Everything about him—his scent, the low drawl of his voice, that lingering, heated gaze—his entire being was a fucking provocation. But his walls were up. And so were hers.

If Ezra had her this undone already, what could he do to her if their walls ever came down?

With a small, frustrated whimper, Ricki rested her forehead against her arms on top of the piano. She squeezed her thighs together, trying to stop the simmering, low throb, but it was impossible to ignore.

Involuntarily, she rolled her hips in the heavy darkness, imagining his hands on her. His mouth, the tip of his tongue skimming her skin. Kissing her, biting, teasing, making her shake, making her wet, making her his.

Her whole body was humming now. Ricki slid her hand down between her legs, pressing herself against her palm. Tingles surged through her and she gasped into the darkness, her eyelids fluttering shut. And then she did something that surprised the entire hell out of her.

Placing a knee on the keys, Ricki crawled on top of the piano. She laid her cheek on the backs of her hands, feeling the supple wood against her core, breathing in the smoky, musky old scent. She imagined the piano pulsing, vibrating, throbbing with music beneath her. It was a dizzying sensation. And then, because of course, Ricki slid her hand under her body and down into the heat of her panties. She pressed her hips against her hand, rubbing herself slowly, her thighs beginning to quiver.

In her mind, she seized the power from Ezra. Because *she* was always the one who teased, who lured, who decided, and she dreamed of what she could do to him, how she could break him down, make him beg, punish him for torturing her like this.

I want him shameless, drowning, she thought. *I need him to feel as*

desperate as he's making me feel.

Did he know what he was doing to her?

A choked gasp escaped her as she writhed against her hand, waves rising and rising. She clenched her thighs together as the first sparks of orgasm spread deliciously through her, on and on until she was weak, panting helplessly.

When Ricki regained her senses—and her sense—she had exactly two thoughts.

The first being *Did I really just fuck a piano? This is either a new high or a new low.*

The second: *If Ezra Walker ever touches me, I'll die.*

CHAPTER 11

A BEACON FOR THE LOST

February 15, 2024

So, Ezra Walker," said Dr. Arroyo-Abril, one of the top-rated life coaches in her field, "when are you going to tell that adorable florist the truth?"

Ezra's life coach had the excitable, rah-rah energy of a top-performing Mary Kay sales rep. With her skunk-streaked shag and stretchy capris, she projected a distinct Midwestern grandma aesthetic. No one would guess that fifty-seven-year-old Dr. Pilar Estefania Luz Arroyo-Abril was born to an aristocratic family in Barcelona, spoke four languages, and had a PhD. Her look was intentional. Dr. Arroyo-Abril wanted her clients to think she was a harmlessly goofy boomer—that way, her sophisticated wisdom would be a shocking reveal.

The most shocking reveal, however, was that she'd once served time for selling fake magic water from the Fountain of Youth in Saint Augustine, Florida. Her con artist roots came in handy when performing favors for clients in need. In her many years as a certified Perennial life coach, Dr. Arroyo-Abril had posed as an ex-wife, a co-op board president—and, earlier that month, Ezra's "assistant."

Ezra slunk into her office on the forty-fourth floor of the Chrysler Building. He was not in the mood to talk, nor to be assaulted by her office decor. From the purple mohair rug

to the hot-pink couch in the precise shade of rest stop liquid soap, it looked like a set from *Clueless*. As usual,

Shania Twain's greatest hits floated softly into the room from a portable speaker.

Despite his mood, Ezra offered her a pleasant smile and shook her hand before taking a seat on the couch, which broke protocol. Dr. Arroyo-Abril encouraged her clients to *lie* down on the couch. The better for her to assert dominance as she swiveled about in her leopard-print office chair, delivering insightful declarations regarding their mental health.

But Ezra never lay down. He never laid himself bare at all.

Usually a paragon of composure, Ezra had lately been… not himself. According to Dr. Arroyo-Abril in their last session, he was *Laden with regret! Paralyzed by indecision! Lost in a sea of confusion!* But it wasn't his fault. Years ago, he'd received a diagnosis that had altered the course of his life, rendering him incapable of committing to anyone or anything for very long. But what was he going to do, wallow? Of course not. Instead, he'd gotten used to it.

That's the thing about resilience, he thought. *With enough time, even the most bizarre circumstances become banal.*

But now he'd met Ricki. He couldn't think of anything *but* Ricki.

For her protection, he had to smother their spark before it caught fire. And he had no clue how to do this on his own. Good thing he had a life coach. Ostensibly, Ezra liked to think of himself as an evolved, modern man. In fact, he actually enjoyed his sessions with Dr. Arroyo-Abril.

Well, he tolerated them.

I hate them, thought Ezra, massaging his brow with his fingertips.

But he trusted the good doctor. She'd gracefully and thoughtfully ushered him through one of the most harrowing times of his life. And now he'd come to rely on their bimonthly visits. Putting his mental health in her hands was a fucking relief. Like paying someone to clean your house or do your taxes. Outsourcing your dirty work.

A confirmed stoic, Ezra wasn't built for self-examination.

When faced with his own Big Feelings, Ezra froze up. He didn’t cry (it was unsatisfying and aggravated his sinuses). He staved off anxiety by cooking for hours (don’t let the brawny build and big hands fool you; he julienned with the precision of a Bocuse d’Or chef). And, as a rule, he allowed despair to linger for only one business day (after that, he’d bury the pain so deep, he’d forget where to find it).

Ezra didn’t need Dr. Arroyo-Abril to tell him that emotional blockage had everything to do with where and how he was raised, in a town stuck in quicksand, sinking backward into time. His dad, his granddad, and so on— all the musically gifted Ezra Walkers before him—their philosophy was, if you’re gonna fall apart, you better just stay in pieces, because whatever happens tomorrow might be a thousand times worse. Don’t weep—make songs! So he’d retreat to the keys and bang out what was coursing through his veins, shaping his rage, sadness, and grief into something beautiful.

But that gift had stopped giving long ago. Ezra hadn’t finished an original composition in years. Instead, he’d play snippets of the same half- written song floating around in his head. And recently, this almost-complete melody had been positively haunting him. Keeping him up at night. He just couldn’t connect the dots, couldn’t make the song work. He was still embarrassed he’d played some of it in front of Ricki at Bar Exquise. Ezra had never played anything unfinished for an audience.

How dare Ricki Wilde make him feel so settled, so at peace, that he forgot himself?

Ezra couldn’t create his own music anymore, so these days he worked as an anonymous journeyman, playing backup for other artists. And since composing had been his coping mechanism, he now had no tools to process his swirling confusion over Ricki. Ezra needed Dr. Arroyo-Abril’s help, desperately.

Right now, she was peering at him through her flame-red bifocals, all gleefully judgmental smiles and dimpled enthusiasm.

“I repeat,” she said. “When are you going to tell that adorable florist the truth? Because if you do not, I will! Which will be strange for her, as I am sure by now she has forgotten me. How long has it been since I spoke to her?”

“Almost two weeks,” he answered glumly.

“So right now I am just a foggy memory to her. Soon, I will have vanished from her mind completely!”

I know the rules, he thought, trying to remain calm. *Can*

we please get to the part where you help me?

Ezra leaned forward, manspreading with his elbows on his knees. “What I’m supposed to tell Ricki, exactly? This is all your fault, by the way. I gave you cash to buy the painting for me. Not to give her my number.”

Dr. Arroyo-Abril gasped, mock offended. “I was just speeding up the inevitable. My thinking was the sooner you two spoke, the faster you could find a solution to your… conundrum.”

“She showed up to my house,” he said indignantly. “She knows where I *live*. Do you understand how wrong that is? The less she knows about me, the better.”

“Too late,” she said with a cheerful shrug.

He shook his head, frustrated. “I can’t keep pushing her away, and my whole 'I’m private’ excuse feels so stupid. I think she can tell how I… the way I… She knows…”

“Yes, Ezra, I am sure she can sense how you feel about her.” She sighed. “Tell her the truth.”

“I can’t do that.” With miserable finality, he flipped up the hood of his Kenzo tiger sweatshirt and then slowly pulled the laces until it closed over his face, shutting out the world.

“Well, you cannot do *that*.” She waved her hands toward the lump of indulgent sadness sitting on her couch. “Listen, I know how hard Februaries are for you. Especially this one, it being a leap year and all.”

Ezra nodded, sliding off his hood. He opened his mouth to speak, and then shut it again.

“Talk to me,” she ordered, tapping a glitter-sneakered foot. “Come on, how do you feel?”

“I feel like another tragedy’s fixing to happen,” he pronounced with grave finality. “I know it will. And I can’t hurt Ricki. I couldn’t live with it.”

Dr. Arroyo-Abril pursed her lips and nodded. They were finally getting somewhere.

“I am proud of you, Ezra. You have done a lot of work to get over your ex’s tragic death.”

He flinched. After all this time, it still stung.

“I just want a day where I don’t think about it,” he said quietly.

“I want that for you, too,” she assured him. “Did you do your homework? The hug experiment? Finding one person to hug, as often as possible?”

“Absolutely not,” he said petulantly. Ezra didn’t hug. He

didn’t understand it. How long was he supposed to stay in the embrace? Was there

a standard time that was acceptable? Why wasn't a handshake sufficient?

Hugging suggested safety and comfort, which, in his experience, had always been a lie. A cruel hoax.

"Hugs are a simple, easy, safe way to get endorphins and serotonin." She rolled her chair closer to the couch, wagging her index finger in his face. "Stop being so change resistant, Ezra!"

"I am what I am. You shave a tiger, and its skin has the same stripes as its fur."

"Sure, but then you will have a furious tiger." He blinked. "That… doesn't mean anything."

"Well, have you taken any of my advice regarding self-soothing? Have you tried the anxiety app? What have you been doing to de-stress? Have you heard any of my advice?"

"I heard you plenty," he drawled, the picture of sullen sadboi energy. "I've been watching these YouTube videos of Muslim people putting their cats on these tiny prayer mats, to pray with them. That's comforting."

"I see. Well, whatever works, I suppose," Dr. Arroyo-Abril said with a frown. "Talk to me about these encounters with Ricki. What happens when you run into her? How do you feel?"

"I'm just fucking… Pardon… I'm just drawn to her. No matter how hard I try to avoid places I think she'll be, we always end up together."

Every day, Ezra would leave his house to go to his part-time job, dog- sitting, and invariably, he'd collide with Ricki. Or sometimes she'd collide with him. He didn't just feel pulled in her direction; he felt *yanked*. He'd be walking down 141st, then he'd blink, and he'd suddenly be headed up 127th. It was science-fiction bizarre.

And I knew it would be like this, he thought. *I was warned this would happen. But it doesn't make it easier.*

"It's terrible. But seeing her is also… It's also…"

Dr. Arroyo-Abril made an encouraging gesture. "You have come so far with your communication skills! Keep

going. It is also *what*?”

“It’s also the reason I wake up in the morning,” he said, his voice solemn, tortured with longing. “Even if it’s just bumping into her outside Duane Reade. My life orbits around her. Around those moments.”

He pined for those encounters; he ached for them. His entire day was spent manifesting a sixty-second run-in with the most radiantly irresistible

woman he'd ever met. He was drawn to her as helplessly as if he were pulled by a string.

Ricki's face was like a goddamn beacon for the lost.

And what hurt, what truly *killed*, was that Ezra had to convince her that he wasn't ravenously desperate to learn everything about her: her diner order; every patch of her skin; which songs made her cry; what her voice sounded like at 3:00 a.m. when she was sleepy, unguarded, and breathing the same air as him. All he wanted in the world was to take her on a normal date: to sit across from her at dinner, listening to her talk about her favorite movie, her job, her dreams. To catch a matinee with her and share Junior Mints or Twizzlers, or maybe she was a Sour Patch Kids person—who knew? He wanted to find out.

Ezra longed to do regular stuff with Ricki. But he wasn't a regular dude. And if he revealed the real reason why he wasn't regular, she'd never believe him. Worse, she might call a psychiatric institute.

"Earth to Ezra!" Dr. Arroyo-Abril waved a hand in front of his face. "Where did you go?"

"Oh. Apologies, Doctor." Shaking himself out of a daze, he sat up straighter and looked her in the eye. "The other day, I remembered this time I was in DC for a July 4 club date. That morning, I was hanging out with the bassist, this fella called Big Arkansas. Ever notice that only the hardest guys are named after states?"

"I have always found that to be true, yes."

"Anyway, that afternoon we were eating at some spot on Georgia Avenue, smoking a joint… er, a doobie… no, a blunt…"

"It is okay, Ezra. Linguistic glitches are normal for people with our particular diagnosis." She patted his knee. "The technical term is 'linguitches.'"

He eyed her with skepticism. "You just made that up."

"It is a fact. Clearly outlined in the Winter 1974 *Journal of Perennial Sciences*. Page thirty-seven, paragraph four. Classic text, *classic*!"

She was so tricky, you could believe only eighty percent of what came out of her mouth.

“Anyway, the weed was laced with something. It was potent. I couldn’t move. For hours. I sat in a bar in the grips of wild paranoia, just waiting for it to pass. Finally, I got the nerve to leave, and the second I stepped outside,

the actual *second*, the entire Howard University marching band charged down the sidewalk. Cymbalists, majorettes, drummers—it was a stampede."

Dr. Arroyo-Abril threw her head back and cackled.

"I was terrified. But then I got out of the way, paused, and listened. I was like, this band is *tight*. That's how I feel every time I see her. Like I'm being trampled by an elite HBCU marching band."

"Mmm," she said, nodding supportively. "Ezra, I know you like to pretend you have no feelings. But what you have described? You have fallen for her."

"No, I haven't."

"Yes, you have. Receive it."

"No, I haven't." He took a beat. It should've been impossible to feel what he felt for Ricki after knowing her for two seconds. It *should've* been impossible. But denying the truth was futile. Especially in front of a licensed psychotherapist.

"You know what? Yeah. I've fallen for her. Bad."

Dr. Arroyo-Abril cheered, waving her fists in the air. "Beautiful work!

Take a deep, cleansing breath, and hold space for this emotion." He held up a hand. "I told you, I draw the line at 'hold space.'"

Soulfully, the doctor placed her palm over her heart, nodding with understanding. "Now that we know you are crazy about her, let us talk solutions. You have two options."

"I'm listening." Ezra sat forward again, clasping his hands together eagerly. Finally, the advice he paid her for.

"Option one is to tell Ricki the truth so she has a clear understanding of why you cannot be together. And then book her a flight out of New York City."

"Emphatic no. What's option two?"

"Same as option one, but no plane. Instead, Ricki stays here, and both of you figure out how to solve your problem. Together, as a team!"

"So, either way I have to tell the truth?"

"Communication only works when you say what you

mean.” Dr. Arroyo-Abril pointed in the air for emphasis. “Anything less than the truth is a lie.”

Ezra shut his eyes and sank against the back of the ultra-pink couch, trying to process this information. When he opened them, he looked

defeated. “I suppose I’ll tell her the truth, then.” “Wonderful!”

“But what if I start linguitching?”

“Do not make fun, Ezra. It is a real word.”

He chuckled. He loved lightly roasting her. Few people in the world understood him like his eccentric life coach, and he appreciated her for it.

“You should go visit her at her flower shop. As soon as possible.”

“I can’t meet her there,” said Ezra, sinking back into seriousness. “You know I can’t.”

I’ve managed to avoid that block since that terrible February, and I’m not ready to face it, he thought.

“You will have to face it at some point,” said Dr. Arroyo-Abril, reading his mind. “And speaking of, when was the last time you played music? Your music?”

I can’t tell her I spent Wednesday night playing TV show theme songs to an invisible audience, he thought. *It’s too embarrassing. But quietly? It felt good hearing the reaction upstairs, through the ceiling. Making strangers laugh and stomp and sing. For a little while, it was fun to connect to a crowd again. It’s the best feeling in the world. The only feeling in the world. But I can’t fathom playing anything of my own ever again. I’m too numb to play. No inspiration. No hunger.*

Ezra remembered the first time he heard Dizzy Gillespie’s “A Night in Tunisia.” On a frantic high, he named his new Doberman pinscher puppy Tunisia (RIP). He ate at a local Tunisian restaurant exclusively for six months. He was ready to drop everything and *relocate* to Tunisia. That was the transcendent power of a song! The really good ones could rearrange the topography of your soul. It was what drove a musician’s sublime hunger.

But no one had prepared Ezra for when it would vanish, when he’d no longer leap out of bed with a thunderous urge to play till the world fell away. No one had warned Ezra of the bleak nothingness that would blanket him when that appetite evaporated.

“You know I don’t play anymore.” Ezra’s tone made clear

that the conversation was closed.

“But that is not exactly true, is it?” Dr. Arroyo-Abril wouldn’t be Dr. Arroyo-Abril if she didn’t push.

Ezra let his head fall back against the wall. “Whenever I see her, I hear

the pieces of that song in my mind. It's frustrating. I can sense the melody just on the edge of my brain, but I can't grasp it. Can't put it together."

"Hmm," she responded. "What do you think it will take for you to complete it?"

Instead of answering her pointed question, Ezra changed the subject. "You ever think about the fact that your whole life is a memory?" he asked. "Everything is past except for right now. And right now's gone in a flash." Slowly, Ezra scratched the back of his neck, musing on this. "What's the point of anything?"

"Ezra, listen. You have set up your life to be temporary. I know why you have done this. But that florist does not. Tell her the truth."

And then, because it bore repeating, Dr. Arroyo-Abril placed her hand over his and said, "*Anything less than the truth is a lie*."

CHAPTER 12

FLOWER SHOWER

February 15–16, 2024

Ezra was bristling with anxiety. For a full half hour, he'd been pacing back and forth in a living room that wasn't his, while Focaccia, an oversized snow-white Siberian husky who also wasn't his, trailed behind him. The pacing wasn't helping, so he stopped abruptly, tripping up the gargantuan furball behind him. Focaccia yelped, looking up at her dog-sitter with surprised wintergreen eyes.

"Awww, did I hurt you? My apologies, good girl." He bent down to ruffle her fur, and she happily hurled herself at Ezra, knocking him backward and lapping at his face. He loved it. Ezra would argue that while most people were demons, most dogs were angels.

Whenever he was in town, he offered his dog-sitting services on Rover.com. He traveled too much to adopt his own, so this was the next best thing. Out of the twenty or so dogs he'd ever watched, Focaccia was, by far, Ezra's favorite client. Lovingly, he hooked an arm around her neck, roughing her up a bit.

Now I can tell Dr. Arroyo-Abril I did my hug homework, he thought.

With a sigh, he tossed Focaccia's tennis ball across the room, and she sprinted after it. Not even Focaccia could distract him from his self- imposed torture.

Ezra had been trying to gather the courage to call Ricki all day, but he

was paralyzed. He couldn't remember the last time he'd hesitated before calling a woman. He'd never struggled in this area, because generally speaking, he truly enjoyed their company. In fact, Ezra could usually find something interesting or lovable about every woman he met. Which made it an oddity that he'd never really had a long-term, committed relationship.

The beginning was always so good, with that "how the hell did we find each other" thrill. But Ezra could never take it any further. It would've required facing his dismal diagnosis, the perennial thorn in his side, and he just wasn't brave enough. Which was fine, because within minutes of meeting a woman, Ezra instinctively knew if she'd be up for his casual, no- strings brand of relationship. It took a certain kind of person. They, too, were restless, wrestling with their past and plagued with nihilistic recklessness. Or they were stuck in sexless, boring marriages and needed a quick thrill. His women weren't into promises. Just short, satisfying bursts of abandon.

But then there was Ricki. She didn't have the shadow of tragedy like the others. She was all hope and light and captivating artistic vulnerability, as luminous and colorful as sunlight refracted through a stained-glass window. God. There was no way to know her without losing himself. And hurting her.

Tapping his phone against his chin, Ezra sat against the wall of his client's clean-lined, contemporary condo, with Focaccia curled up against him. He didn't know how to explain the ruin of his past, nor the pointlessness of his future. He'd never done it before.

Anything less than the truth is a lie.

His heart in his throat, he peered down into Focaccia's crystalline eyes. "Tell me I ain't gotta do this, Focaccia."

She cocked her head and softly howled. "Awooo." "F-sharp. Pitchy but robust. Now gimme a G."

Focaccia panted happily and then hit the note with piercing precision.

"Awooo-ooo!"

She was Ezra's favorite because he'd taught her how to sing.

"Focaccia is outchea *croonin',*" mumbled Ezra proudly. He pointed at her. She sat up tall. He turned his palm face up, and she raised her chin. Then he slowly raised his hand, and Focaccia belted out a glass-shattering howl.

Grinning, Ezra applauded and tossed her a treat from his pocket. With an impressive lack of grace, she hopped up to catch it in her jaws, missed, and then scuttled after it on the floor.

Why are you forcing this dog to do vocal runs? he asked himself, disgusted. *Call Ricki, you cowardly piece of shit. Face it head-on. Call her.*

He had no other choice. Ezra finally picked up the phone and dialed Wilde Things' number. It rang once, twice, and then…

"Wilde Things, this is Ricki."

Her on-the-phone voice was husky, the sultry rasp of a dangerous woman from a neo-noir film. It was at odds with her radiant demeanor, the permanent twinkle in her eye. Hearing Ricki's sexy, disembodied voice in his ear knocked him way off-kilter. He couldn't even respond.

"Wilde Things… What up, what up, *what uppp*."

Okay, that snapped Ezra out of his trance. "Hello? Good morning… er, afternoon, Ricki." He cleared his throat. "It's Ezra?"

Silence. Three breaths of silence. His stomach in knots, Ezra wondered what she was thinking.

"Hmm," she said finally. "So. You do have a
cell phone." "Doesn't everyone?"

"Well, all I had was your landline."

Dr. Arroyo-Abril loathed cell phones. She only used hers to play *Tetris* and abuse the Find My Car app. She'd memorized Ezra's home phone, but not his cell.

"Yeah, I guess I'm old school, like you said. The old-timey manners, the house phone."

"I like your old man vibes. You're an original."

Fuck, this is going to hurt, thought Ezra.

Before he could think of anything appropriate to say, Ricki interrupted him, this time in a slightly more formal tone, as if she were careful of getting too familiar, too chatty. "So, can I help you with something?"

"Apologies if I'm being a bother. You know, calling you
out of nowhere.
I just… I was wondering if… Well, what are

you doing?” “Right now?”
“Right now, sure. Or later.”
“Well… it’s two in the afternoon. I’m working.”
“Oh? Um. Of course you are!” He grimaced and groaned. Pitying him,

Focaccia nuzzled into his side, licking his hand.

"You sound nervous," said Ricki, reading him through the phone.

"I *am* nervous," he admitted. He was first-date nervous. First-kiss nervous. First-everything nervous.

"Yeah? Why?"

Ezra shut his eyes and dropped his head back against the wall. "There's something I need to tell you. But it's not the kind of thing you say over the phone."

"I see," said Ricki. She paused, and the silence was thick. "Ezra, agreeing to avoid each other was a smart idea. I can't afford any distractions. Something about you makes me feel crazy. I feel like I'm losing it."

Hearing Ricki say his name sent an involuntary shiver across his skin. He wanted to tell her that he felt crazy, too, that since they'd met, every moment they weren't together felt wasted.

I don't know this woman's middle name, he thought. *I don't know her favorite book or her most embarrassing middle school memory. But it doesn't matter, because I'm already lost.*

How do you break up with someone who isn't even your girlfriend? It was like serving divorce papers to the stranger in line behind you at the CVS register.

"I agree," said Ezra quietly. "We should try harder to stay away from each other."

Anything less than the truth is a lie. "There's just one problem," he continued. "What's that?"

"I don't want to. Do you?"

When Ricki didn't respond, Ezra kept talking. No filter, no hesitation. "All I do is wonder when I'll see you again," he admitted. "No, 'wonder' is too weak a word. The urge to be near you? Even just for a random thirty-second run-in at a bodega or outside a café? I'm strong; I can take abuse, but this is unbearable. And, by the way, you in that red dress at the wedding? It's the best and worst thing that's ever happened to me. You had me coming apart at the seams,

and I’m frankly sick of pretending that it’s not the last image in my brain at night. And you’re… you’re so funny, both intentionally and unintentionally, and I… I just want to be near you.

“But I’m gutted, because I can’t… we can’t… go further. And I’d like to tell you the whole truth, face to face. Will you let me?”

Ezra let go of a breath and tried to steady his heart rate. He hadn’t expected to spill it all like that. Hearing himself say the words out loud made his feelings all the more real.

He spoke again, his voice barely above a whisper. “Please, Ricki. Will you let me?”

There was almost a full, terrifying minute of endless quiet before Ricki responded.

“The shop is closed tomorrow, so I’ll be free then. Meet me at noon.”

The next day was warm. Oddly warm. Under no healthy circumstances was a New York City February supposed to feel Palm Beach balmy. But the peculiarity of it was thrilling. Everyone in Harlem was outside, soaking up their good fortune before it expired, knowing it was too rare and strange to last.

At 11:47 a.m., Ezra was standing catty-corner to 225½ West 137th Street, trying to forget everything he knew about that building.

The brownstone looked the way it always looked: like all the others on the block with its grand facade. But now there was an overgrown oasis of a shop nestled to the side of the dramatic stoop. WILDE THINGS.

This was a new place, with a new history. It was Ricki’s turn to be here. He wondered how it looked inside. He ached to see where Ricki lived, slept, and worked. How she’d turned a place that held terrible memories for him into something beautiful.

And then there she was.

Ezra saw Ricki through the window, balancing on a steep ladder and reaching high up to the ceiling. A ragged tool belt was slung low around her waist. She appeared to be hammering hooks up there. And then, one by one, she was attaching floor-length transparent strings festooned with silk wildflowers. The effect was flowers falling from the sky,

suspended in midair. How did she come up with this? The installation was surreal, like something from a floaty, trippy dream sequence in a Technicolor film.

And so was Ricki, standing atop the ladder in platform clogs, ass- hugging ’70s flares, and a breezy top cropped short, so a wide sliver of her

skin showed as she reached upward. God, she was a mesmerizing collision of delicate and tough. The tension between the uncompromising strength in her stance and the soft, ripe lusciousness of her hair, her hips…

For one delirious moment, Ezra forgot why he was there.

It definitely wasn't to be a creep. So even though he was early, he rang the bell. Through the window, he saw her startle. And then she climbed down the ladder with a slowness that felt deliberate—*Her ass, dear God*.

Five seconds later, she burst through the door. And Ezra stood before her, visibly gobsmacked.

Ricki was radiant. Breathless. And thoroughly adorable in her transparency that she was pleased to see him.

"You're early," she

breathed. "I'm…

awestruck."

"By what?"

You.

"Your art. I've never seen anything like it."

"You were watching me." A statement, not a question. She locked the front door and then faced him, her expression triumphant.

He didn't deny it. "You like me watching you?"

Her eyes twinkled, but all she offered was the slightest shrug.

"Let's go," she said, and before he could reply, she'd already swept past him to the street. He joined her, and the two headed down West 137th.

"So, what were you working on in there?" wondered Ezra. "It's mesmerizing. Looks like a scene from a fairy tale."

"I'm not really sure yet. But I'm calling it a flower shower," she said, adjusting her bag. It was a mix of canvas and suede, accentuated with tough buckles and hardware. Ezra was certain she'd made it. Her creative detail was in every stitch.

"A flower shower!" repeated Ezra. "That's so good."

Ricki beamed. "Have you ever seen Disney's *Alice in Wonderland*? It was my favorite movie as a kid. There's a

scene where animated Alice is dozing off in the grass on a bright summer day, singing about her imaginary world, and she's surrounded by daisies. It's right before she falls down the rabbit hole, and everything goes topsy-turvy. The only thing that'd make that scene more idyllic would be if she were drenched in a rain shower of flowers." She pulled on her gloves. "It came to me in a dream."

“You remember your dreams?”

“Oh, my dreams are vivid. And they linger.”

She looked at him. He looked back. An electric current buzzed between them, inescapable and palpable.

“I’ve never seen anything so beautiful,” he said, momentarily lost in her face. He couldn’t believe it had slipped out of his mouth. He cleared his throat, trying to gather himself. “Uh, will you sell it?”

“No, it’s just decoration for the shop. I don’t know, times are tough. People work hard. I want to create a place where folks can just escape. I’m selling a fantasy.”

Now, that sounded familiar. Where had Ezra heard that before? In a movie? Had he said it?

“I know it’s silly,” she went on. “It’s just flowers. But that’s what’s great about being a business owner: you can have silly ideas, and no one can tell you no.”

“Nothing silly about it,” he said. “'It’s just flowers’ is the same as 'it’s just music.’ Neither has to mean anything. But in the right hands? Skilled hands? It can mean everything.”

Ricki nodded. As they walked, he stole a glance at her. She chewed a bit on her bottom lip, lost in a private thought. The sun beamed onto her hair, reflecting glimmers of auburn. She was breathtaking. Suddenly, he forgot what he was so frightened of.

“Too bad it’s the last time we’re speaking,” she finally said. “You saw me work, but I’ll never get to watch *you* work. The little bit you played downstairs at Bar Exquise was a tease. I wanna hear the rest.”

“You want to see me

play?” “Of course I do.

I’m curious.”

He shook his head, a playful gleam in his eye.

“Nah.” “Excuse me? Why?”

“Because I don’t do that. It’s cheap.” He gave her a slight grin. It was cocky as hell, and he knew it.

“Cheap ’cause you think it’ll make me

easy.” “Cheap ’cause I know it will.”

Ricki stopped walking and met the challenge in his eyes. Boldly, she took a step closer.

“I did like you watching me,” she said, her voice husky.

Ignoring every alarm going off in his brain, Ezra said, “What game are you playing?”

“The same one you are.”

“This isn’t a game. I’m not toying with you, Ricki. That’s why I’m here.

I owe you the truth.”

“No, you *are* toying with me,” she said. “You have been since we met.

And I just wanted you to feel what I

feel.” “How do you feel?”

She closed her eyes, her lashes fanning out over her flushed cheeks. When she finally gazed up at Ezra with a defenseless vulnerability, it sent him reeling.

“I feel besotted,” she whispered.

Ezra forced himself to stand in place. He knew that if he got closer, if he grazed her skin, touched her, kissed her, then he would never stop.

“Besotted,” he repeated, his voice twisted with inexpressible want. “Ricki. You didn’t know? I feel that, too.”

She stared at him, unblinking. And then a fiery rebellion flared in Ricki’s expression.

“Then, let’s make a gentleman’s agreement,” she said. “Whatever your big, nonnegotiable secret is, don’t tell me now. Tell me tonight. Let’s just have one day together to do whatever we want. And then you’ll tell me, and it’ll all be over.”

“But then at least we’ll have today…,” he said. “Exactly,” she whispered. “Say yes.”

Hadn’t he said yes already?

He’d said yes every night as he gazed at her portrait before drifting into fitful sleep.

He’d said yes when he asked to see her today.

He’d said yes yesterday on the phone when he confessed that her red dress had scrambled his brain.

It was irresponsible and reckless. But Ezra had to say yes. And he continued to say yes all day long, until they were both drowning in unfathomable depths, in too deep.

CHAPTER 13

TRANSCENDENT AND RUINOUS AND SOULMATE-PERFECT

February 16–17, 2024

After that scalding moment outside of Wilde Things, Ricki and Ezra were keeping things as tame as possible while they strolled.

They were careful not to walk too close together. Careful not to discuss anything too real. Careful not to mention the fact that at the end of the day, Ezra would reveal his terrible secret, and they'd go their separate ways.

Ricki and Ezra were careful to avoid becoming hopelessly entangled in each other.

For half an hour, they chatted about generic topics like *New Girl* supremacy and the Knicks as they were headed for a new locally sourced organic restaurant that Ezra wanted to try.

"I don't really live here anymore, so I don't know what's good," he admitted. "But I read a great review of the brunch at Pia's Pantry in *New York* magazine."

Ricki's eyes were bright, her coils loose and lush, billowing around her face. "The actual magazine or online?"

"The actual magazine," he told her. "I need real, physical pages. And I like writing notes in the margins; it's an old

habit.”

She was in emphatic support of this. “Same! What do you write in the

margins?”

“Ideas for songs, mostly. I underline phrases that feel musical in some way or spark a melody.” He shifted his weight from foot to foot, hands in his pockets, looking bashful.

Ricki barely heard him, as she was mid-epiphany. Was Warm Weather Ezra the sexiest Ezra? Before today, she’d thought that his stern, intense brow and beautiful mouth would be the death of her, but, oh, she wasn’t prepared for the erotic onslaught of *his biceps in a short-sleeve shirt*. She wanted to bury her face in the velvety skin under his jaw, get drunk on his woody, clean scent. It was torture.

“I like actual paper, too.” Ricki tried to neutralize herself. “Old stuff has my heart. My favorite pieces to wear are from the ’20s, ’30s, and ’60s. Those women could dress. Josephine Baker, Lena Horne, Diana Ross…”

“I love your style. It’s art, truly. Your attention to detail is a throwback to another era.”

“Thank you,” she said shyly. “I’ve just always appreciated the way our ancestors would show up and show out. Those old Van Der Zee portraits of Harlem society folks in the 1920s? Beautiful brown skin, satin gowns, suits, hats, every sexual orientation… all flexing to the nines.”

“Strong flexual content,” Ezra said, nodding. Ricki gasped. “Are you a pun guy?”

“I’m *the* pun guy. I’m the punniest.”

“I wanted to name my shop Botany Flowers Lately? But I couldn’t trademark a question. Clever, right?”

“Meh, that one’s kinda rough around the hedges.”

Ricki rolled her eyes melodramatically. Ezra looked so proud. Dimples they didn’t know they had were popping. They were positively goofy on each other. It was enough to make them forget that every moment they shared today would be their last together.

Ezra pointed to a bland restaurant facade up the block, its beige awning spelling out PIA’S PANTRY. “Bottomless Brunch” was written in lilting gold cursive on a chalkboard

easel on the sidewalk.

“There’s the place,” he said. “Just up yonder.”

Ricki couldn’t help but smile at him. “I don’t say 'yonder’ enough.” At the entrance, Ezra pulled open the door and poured on the charm.

“Ricki Wilde, would you do me the honor of accompanying me to this oasis of libations and farm-to-table delights?”

“I’d love nothing more, Ezra Walker,” she said with flirtatious sweetness. Then they were greeted by a grim hostess in indigo lipstick.

“Welcome,” she mumbled flatly in a strong Bronx accent. “You got a reservation?”

“Apologies, ma’am, I didn’t make one. Any chance y’all have an open table?”

The hostess furrowed her fashionably thick brows and then looked Ezra and Ricki up and down. “Don’t you wanna check anything?”

Ricki shook her head pleasantly. “No, I think we’re good.”

Sighing, the hostess pushed through a curtain. “*À chacun ses goûts.* Follow me.”

“To each his own,” Ezra whispered to Ricki. “You speak French?”

“I used to live in France.” “What haven’t you done?”

“This.” Eyes sparking with mischief, he reached for her hand and laced his fingers with hers.

They’d never touched before, skin on skin, and a tingly, surging warmth radiated from their palms. For a moment, they were rooted to their spot, eyes locked on each other, grips tightening. Lightly, Ezra ran his thumb against her finger. Ricki let out a small, involuntary gasp.

“Stop,” she hissed.

“You stop,” he commanded, eyes twinkling. “Have some decorum.”

And then Ezra led her into the restaurant, following the hostess to the table. Pia’s Pantry was dimly lit, with faux-leather, graffiti-tagged banquettes lining the walls. Only one was free, nestled in the back. Ambient Europop warbled softly through speakers. The restaurant smelled like cinnamon and good coffee. Releasing their hands, they slid into the banquette, side by side.

They were seated for four seconds before Ricki noticed the other guests. “Look,” she whispered, clapping her palm to her mouth.

A couple across the room paid their check and then rose from their seats. The guy was wearing a buffalo plaid flannel; his date wore a cozy cashmere sweater—and, well, that was where their outfits stopped. The man had on

tighty-whities. The woman was wearing a mesh thong.

They all looked normal on top. But down below, they wore nothing but their underwear.

Suddenly, a svelte young white guy with a handlebar mustache, a polo shirt, and a Speedo hurried to their table. “Sir? Ma’am? I’m your waiter. Did the hostess offer to check your pants?”

Ezra stared at him, incredulous. “If I may… what the hell y’all *do* at this brunch?”

“Well, this is a bottomless brunch. No bottoms.” He paused. “It’s a pun?”

Ricki glanced at Ezra, lips kneaded together in rising hilarity.

“Okay, so I just skimmed the write-up! It was in the 'Best Of’ section.” “Best of what, though?” giggled Ricki.

The waiter handed them drink menus. “Sit with it for a moment. Our clientele finds the experience to be quite freeing.”

He left, and Ricki and Ezra watched a thirty-something blonde walk past them to the bathroom, wearing a designer blouse and cherry-print bikini briefs.

Ricki’s eyes were huge. “Is this even sexy? These seats are leather; it can’t feel good on naked thighs.” She quieted her voice. “I read about a woman who sat on her leather couch for six years, and her skin fused to it. She had to be cut away.”

“An introvert’s cautionary tale,” said Ezra, loving the absurdity of this experience.

“Look, I’m kink-positive, but I can’t imagine eating croque madame in a thong.”

“No? How about a Belgian waffle?”

“How repressed do you have to be to require a panty brunch to unleash your inner thot?”

“I bet most of these folks came here just to tell the story later.” He slid the menu toward Ricki. Leaning their heads toward each other, they scanned the cocktail list: Triangle of Love. Sunday Undie. Banana (Hammock) Daiquiri. Well Hung.

The waiter returned, his spindly, hairy legs looking so vulnerable. “Cocktail? Fine day for an Ass-erol Spritz! I should’ve mentioned that, legally, you must remove your pants to stay.”

“No thanks,” said Ricki. “We’re intentionally trying to keep our pants *on* today.”

The waiter scratched his chin, exposing a #BLM wrist tattoo. “I don’t know if I’m allowed to do this, but follow me. And keep your eyes to yourself.”

Eyes trained on the floor, Ezra and Ricki trailed the waiter through the restaurant and into the backyard. And there, before them, was a snow globe brought to life. The pandemic-era globe was decorated with ski-chalet-style features: twinkly lights, a white shag rug, a rustic picnic bench, and cozy throw blankets. It was magical.

“It’s yours for the hour, if you want it,” said the pants-less waiter.

Oh, they wanted it. Ricki and Ezra took their seats inside their own private bubble, pants on, and the waiter left them to grab some drinks.

“We better tip him good,” said Ezra. “He saved our lives.” “A true ally. Did you see the BLM tat on his wrist?”

“I did,” he acknowledged mildly. “The gesture’s appreciated. I’m just… tired. Inventing slogans to justify your humanity, again and again, is depressing. 'Black Lives Matter’ was 'Black Power’ was 'A Black Man Was Lynched Yesterday.’ Feels like *Groundhog Day*.”

She agreed. “Think of the protest songs. There’s one every decade. Billie sang 'Strange Fruit’ in the ’30s. Sam Cooke wrote 'A Change Is Gonna Come’ in the ’60s.”

“Marvin wrote 'What’s Going On’ in the ’70s. NWA wrote 'Fuck tha Police’ in the ’80s. And on and on.” Ezra sighed and rubbed the back of his neck. “I’ve lived through so much pointless suffering. I’ve lost so many people. It takes a toll.”

Ricki eyed the twenty-eight-year-old man across from her. They were the same age, but he seemed so worldweary. What had he seen?

And, God help her, there it was: Ricki was drawn to this secret tragedy of Ezra, the mystery, the tangible sadness.

His unknowable depths.

"Well, the world may be in shambles around us," said Ricki, ever optimistic, "but we're still creating through it. We'll always have art, love, stories, adventures, beauty…"

"Flowers," he said with a grin.

"Pianos." She grinned back. "Can I be horribly nosy for a second?"

“Go ahead,” he said, his voice an invitation. “Do your worst.”

“How does a freelance pianist afford to drop thousands on art before he’s even thirty?”

“No big secret, just good investments. And songwriting credits.” “Yeah? Anything I know?”

“Hmm.” He plucked at his full bottom lip, thinking. “Do you listen to any big band tunes? Bebop? Blues? Jazz?”

“Well, not really. I’m more of a hip-hop, pop, R&B girl.” “And where do you think all that comes from?”

“What you’re not going to do is mansplain the history of twentieth- century music to me, a *pop culture scholar*.”

Guilty, he chuckled, his teeth so pretty and white against his rich skin. “Don’t get me wrong,” said Ricki. “I respect all those influences, but I prefer new shit. Sometimes, when I hear early artists—blues, for example, like those 1930s Robert Johnson recordings—I appreciate the artistry, but it sounds creaky.”

“I get it. The first model may not be the flashiest, but it’s the smartest. Take the internet. Sure, it changed the world. But the telegraph is its great- granddaddy, and *that* was smarter. *That* was the unfathomable leap. Before that, information traveled as fast as some fella on a horse.”

Ricki blinked slowly, resting her chin on her palm. Why was it that every new thing she learned about Ezra, every door he opened to her, made her fall harder?

It just isn’t possible, she thought, *to be this hungry for a person.*

“You’re odd, Ezra Walker. You not like anyone I’ve ever met.”

“I know,” he said, raising a glass of water to his mouth. “I’m a mystery.” “I’m jealous. Everything shows on my face, I hear.”

“It does, and it’s fucking charming.” He groaned a little. “Pardon.” “Ezra, you can curse in front of me. You’re following an old-school rule based on the idea that women are fragile. I’m not fragile.” “Obviously not. But I told you,

I’m chivalrous.”

“Yeah?” Her expression flickered with challenge. “Hypothetically speaking, what else would you do in the name of chivalry? Order for me? Dress me? Throw me over your shoulder and carry me across a puddle?”

Ezra focused his eyes on hers, then leisurely, his gaze traveled down to her lips and back up again. He drank her in. It was boldly intimate.

“Depends. What do you want me to do?”

I’m losing focus, thought Ricki, pressing her thighs together, willing the ache to subside.

“Anyway,” she continued, stomach fluttering, “speaking of music, I wanted to ask you what you were playing at Bar Exquise. I can’t get those few chords out of my head.”

It’s like you wrote it for me, she thought. *It’s haunting me.*

“Not sure. I hear bits of the melody, but I can’t turn it into a full song.
Something’s missing.”

“What do you think’s missing, Ezra?”

“Remains to be seen, Ricki.” His eyes danced. “Where did your name come from?”

She groaned. “God, I hoped you wouldn’t ask. I’m named after my dad.
Richard Wilde.”

Ezra’s face lit up in pure, wholesome delight. “Don’t laugh at me!”

“I’m not.” He was. “I *love* it. So he’s Big Richard and you’re… Little Richard?”

“Call me Little Richard and I’ll throw hands. My parents were expecting a boy! And the Tiffany silver spoon had already been engraved, so…” She shrugged. “It’s a lot to live up to. I’ll never be as successful as my dad.”

“But it’s your life, not his. You’re happy with your choices, right?” Ricki inhaled deeply, mulling this over. “I think so. Yeah, I am.”

“Then nothing else matters,” he told her. “Love well. Eat well. Fuck well. And leave the world better off than you found it. That’s success.”

Ricki folded her arms across her chest. “You’re not gonna apologize for 'fuck well’?”

Ezra curled his mouth into something dangerous, somewhere between a smirk and a grin. Leisurely, he finished off his water.

“I never apologize for fucking well.”

The bare-legged waiter had returned to take their order,

and sensing the palpable erotic flame flickering between them, he immediately scurried back inside. They never noticed him.

Ricki and Ezra stayed for hours, getting tipsy on cocktails named after

euphemisms. They debated the best Entenmann's dessert (Ricki: Louisiana crunch cake; Ezra: cinnamon buns), the weirdest Black TV sibling (Ricki: Sondra Huxtable; Ezra: that kid on *Shameless*), and their favorite pastimes (Ricki: refurbishing other people's clothes; Ezra: walking other people's dogs). They barely even touched their banana pancakes.

By the time they decided to walk off the drinks, it was almost dark, that dusky, in-between time where the setting sun took its last gasp of the day. Neither wanted it to end. With the night came the reality of Ezra's secret, and so they were both playing with time—prolonging it, trying to savor each moment before whatever this was dissolved into dust.

They walked till they reached the Riverside Drive Viaduct, a fifty-foot- tall roadway atop a row of picturesque arches. Tonight, a sign shouting HARLEM UPTOWN NIGHT MARKET blanketed the top of an arch, and underneath was a rollicking block party. There was glow-in-the-dark mini golf, food trucks, and a deejay painted iridescent colors. In the center, folks danced to throwback hip-hop mixed with Doja Cat, SZA, and Bad Bunny.

Buzzing and warm, Ricki and Ezra were only too happy to join, drawn to the flea market, with shelves of photographs, records, and magazines. Of course, Ricki made a beeline for the clothing racks.

"*She is everything*," she gushed, pulling out a swishy, strapless chiffon gown. "Very losing my virginity in the back seat of an Edsel after the sock hop."

"Oh, that's yours. You need it," said Ezra, emerging with an armful of *Life* magazines, the top one opened to a profile on Ray Charles from July 1966.

"It's a testament to Jamie Foxx's performance," declared Ricki, "that I can't look at that man without seeing his face."

Ezra's jaw dropped. "Say again?"

"I said what I said," she chirped playfully.

"Oh, you cuttin' up. Jamie Foxx is talented, but this is *Ray Charles*. I mean, when he was young, he needed some

coaching. His right hand was on the weaker side, so I…”

Ricki raised a brow. “You what? What were you going to say?” “Nothing, just stopping myself before I get too technical,” he said

quickly. “So. You trying on that dress?”

“I should, right?” She stepped in front of a floor-length mirror, examining it. “My mom had a dress like this. That maniac has style, if nothing else.

“Here, try this on,” she said, grabbing a tuxedo jacket from a rack marked “1920s.” The lapel was scented with long-ago cologne. Ezra held it against his chest as they stood side by side in front of the floor-length mirror.

They saw themselves together, as a pair, for the first time. And they fit.

Their hands moved toward each other, their pinkies brushing. Ricki felt something shifting between them, like their molecules had been rearranged. “So, what did you have to tell me?” she asked Ezra, her voice trembling. “I need to know. Now. Because this feels too good.”

Just then, the flea market proprietor stepped over to them. He was a slightly stooped seventy-year-old man wearing an Adidas tracksuit. Ezra grabbed his wallet from his pocket and slipped him cash to pay for their pieces. Then he noticed the guy’s face and drew back. It was subtle, but just enough for Ricki to notice.

“You’re a good-looking couple,” the guy said.

“Thank you!” she exclaimed. And, true to form, Ricki continued by oversharing. “We’re making the most out of our final hours together. For reasons unknown, this is our last date.”

“Good. Otherwise, you’d be making a terrible mistake.”

“I’m sorry?” She flinched, searching for signs that he was joking. “What do you…”

“I mean, you two better stay away from each other,” ordered the guy, pointing an accusatory finger at them. “Only darkness awaits.”

Ezra’s features turned to stone. Grabbing Ricki’s hand, he led her out into the street, leaving behind the clothes, the magazines, and forty dollars in change.

Ricki couldn’t grasp what had just happened. “Ezra, what was he talking about?”

“Poor fella. Mental health care is draconian in this country,” said Ezra. “You won’t remember him in a month, anyway.”

You'll forget him in a month, anyway.
Now, where had she heard that before?

By the time they walked back to Wilde Things, it was around 9:00 p.m. Their tipsiness had faded into a pleasant, cozy buzz, and that bizarre encounter was, for now, on the back burner.

Ricki stood in her doorway and peered up at Ezra. “Do you… want to come in? Have some bad Keurig coffee? A nightcap?”

“No.” The sadness in his face was like a punch in her heart. “I should decline.”

“Right. Of course. So, do you want to break up with me here, or inside?”

They looked at each other, both aching with pain over losing a person they barely knew. A dry wind whipped around them, tossing Ricki’s hair.

“I don’t want this night to end,” he said, his voice low.

“Then come inside for a sec.” She forced a smile. “Wanna see my square piano? You can tell me if it’s worth any money, at least.”

Ezra had no excuses left. In silence, Ricki led him through the lush garden of Wilde Things and back into her apartment. A single beam of moonlight shimmered through the window above her bed. The radiator clanged. A siren went off in the distance. Out in the street, someone laughed, a tinny, faraway sound.

And Ezra was frozen in front of the piano. Even in darkness, Ricki could make out his haunted, stormy expression, like he was fighting a war that Ricki didn’t understand.

Finally, he moved, running his fingers along the piano top.

“Do you want to play?” whispered Ricki. She perched on the edge of her bed, behind the piano bench. “That song I heard you working on?”

Ezra sat at the piano, back facing her, and pushed open the lid to expose the keys. Moonlight danced on his skin. He looked beatific. Ricki watched him, taking in the lines of his strong back and shoulders under his shirt, the skin of his neck. It was quiet, so quiet.

With a weighty exhale, Ezra rubbed his hands together.

He worked his knuckles and curled his hands into fists. Then he hovered his trembling fingertips over the keys.

Ezra glanced at her over his shoulder. His eyes glistened with unshed tears.

“I can’t.” His voice was low, strangled. “I think I need you. To play. I think you were the missing piece.”

Ricki understood. Instantly, she was at the piano. In a smooth, unbroken

gesture, he pulled her onto his lap so that they faced each other, Ricki straddling him.

They were nose to nose, forehead to forehead, lips ghosting each other. With a husky groan, Ezra gripped her hips and sealed her against the strong planes of his chest, wrapping her legs around his waist. There was no space between them. Just raw, rising desire.

"Do it," she breathed against his mouth. "Play for me."

He nipped her bottom lip with his teeth, turning her thighs liquid. "Thank you."

Reaching on either side of her, his fingers instinctively found the keys. And *oh*, the sound that poured out of him. It was the piece from the other night, but more. A complete song. And it was in dialogue with Ricki, melting into her, warming her bones.

Laid bare, Ezra buried his face in Ricki's neck, his breath falling hot on her skin as he played. She clung to him, and he kept on, masterfully, magically coaxing the raw and soaring melody from the instrument. The song blazed through Ricki, the heartbreaking, slow groove arching her back, accelerating her heartbeat.

Ricki sank her fingers into Ezra's biceps and rocked against him, moving with the controlled, synchronized rhythm of his song. She felt him harden, huge and hot, through their clothes. The friction sent waves of pleasure through her. Helplessly, she whimpered his name.

And then Ezra couldn't play anymore.

Gripping Ricki's ass in his hands, he stood up. In seconds, he had her pressed against the wall, her feet barely touching the ground. He crashed his mouth over hers in a bruising, ravenous kiss. He tasted like whiskey and warmth. She tasted like cherries and cream. They clung to each other, lost in the rush.

Plunging his hand up into her hair, Ezra tipped Ricki's head back, kissing her deeper and greedier still, like he'd never get the chance again. And if she'd ever thought that she'd dominate him, make him pay for toying with her, he ended that fantasy. Because she properly swooned in his arms. This was all-consuming ravishment.

Overwhelmed by Ricki’s scent, the silkiness of her skin, Ezra broke the kiss, drawing upon as much self-control as he could muster, but when Ricki gazed up at him with such vulnerable, naked hunger, he scooped her into

another devouring kiss. In this hot, breathless blur of grasping hands, mouths, tongues, Ezra managed to slip Ricki's shirt over her head.

And then he froze. His face lit up with awe. Ricki's breasts were shockingly lush and voluptuous, practically overflowing out of her bra.

"They're bigger than they look in clothes," she said with a self- conscious giggle.

"Lucky me," he rasped. With one hand, he unclipped her bra—thank fuck for front-fastening bras—and then, with damn near religious reverence, he held her breasts in both hands, running his thumbs over her nipples. Tingling from his touch, she gasped, arching her back. He closed his mouth over a nipple, sucking with increasing tension as cascades of pleasure roared through her.

Ricki needed more. Impatiently, she grabbed at his sweater with fumbling fingers, chanting "*Take this off, take this off, take this off*" until he did, revealing the broad expanse of his chest. He was exquisite. She told him so as she unzipped his jeans, slipping a hand into the elastic of his boxer briefs.

Ricki's eyes widened.

"It's bigger than it looks in clothes," he said with a grin, his eyes hooded with lust.

"Lucky me," she breathed. With a wicked gleam in her eye, she licked her palm wetly and began stroking him. Groaning, he squeezed his eyes shut and rested his forehead against hers. She raised her mouth to his, running her tongue along his bottom lip.

"Stop," he ordered.

"No," she murmured against his mouth.

"Ricki, I'm gonna… *Stop*." Ezra tore her hand away, gathering her wrists and, with one hand, pinning them against the wall above her head. Her breathing went ragged as she was wildly turned on by the restraint.

Trailing succulent kisses down her throat, he slipped his other hand down, down, down, into the soaked cotton of her panties. Mouth hot against her jaw, he lightly stroked her in languorous circles. Her eyes shuttered closed. Her

head fell back against the wall. She was reeling, feeling almost too much.

When she opened her eyes, she saw that Ezra’d dropped to his knees in front of her. And the sight of this big, magnificent man submitting to her

was unimaginably sexy. He gripped her hips and planted a wet, suckling kiss under her belly button, teeth sinking into her soft skin. Ricki's knees buckled. Then, in a bold, hungry move, he pulled her panties to the side and, without ceremony, buried his face in her. "*God*," she breathed as he dragged his tongue along her folds, torturing her with soft suction and indulgent licks, like he'd been dying for it. Like he'd die without it.

She was drowning now, back arched from the wall, breasts flushed, leg hooked on his shoulder. Ezra's muscled arms were the only thing holding her upright, until her rising moans became too much for him to bear.

Ezra pulled Ricki down to him, and the two toppled backward onto her rug in a tangle of limbs. Somehow, with her clinging to him, he reached for a condom from his wallet. With frenzied impatience, she snatched it from him and put it on. Drawing her into a delicious, bruising kiss, he pinned her down under the hot, velvety expanse of his muscled body. They were both caged in, the whole world reduced to this. Just Ricki and Ezra, skin on skin, hearts thundering against each other in the dark.

It was what they'd been aching for. But Ezra paused. He gazed down at her, his face a map of adoration and outrageous want.

And something else. Something Ricki couldn't recognize. "Please," she whimpered.

"Tell me what you want," he demanded, lips teasing hers. Ricki could feel his heartbeat crashing against her chest. He was everywhere, his strong body crushing hers. She arched against him, wrapping her legs around his waist.

"Everything," she gasped. "You, Ezra. *You*…"

He sank into her and *sweet Christ, it was good*. But "good" was too weak a word, because nothing had ever felt like this before: transcendent and ruinous and soulmate-perfect.

Gripping his strong back, Ricki gasped on another hard thrust, and another, and then she couldn't find her voice at all, because she peaked, suddenly and sharply, in an

obliterating spike of pleasure. Ezra fucked her through it, gripping her ass and lifting her into each ferocious stroke, stoking that impossibly deep spot, coaxing her to come again in blinding waves. Only then did Ezra allow himself to break, too, rasping her name against the warmth of her neck.

They clung to each other like this, quivering and quiet.

This was always going to happen.

At some point, they drifted off to sleep, right there on the floor.

In the early morning, Ricki opened her eyes to sunlight streaming through her window. Her cheek rested on his chest, her hand in his. She raised her head, seeing that Ezra was awake. He was staring at the ceiling, his eyes bloodshot and damp. He looked like his heart was already broken.

“Tell me now.” She settled back onto his chest, shutting her eyes, steeling herself against whatever he was going to say. “Tell me everything.”

And so he did.

CHAPTER 14

EVERYWHERE AND NOWHERE

February 16, 2024

Tuesday could spot a fake when she saw one. How could she not when, technically, *she* was fake. Her government name wasn't even Tuesday Rowe; it was Teodozji Roesky. When her mom, Roksana, named her, she couldn't have anticipated that her brown-skinned baby would one day be a TV star—with a manager who'd demand a less "ethnically confusing" moniker.

Ezra Walker was also fake. It was painfully obvious that he wasn't who he said he was. How could Ricki not see it?

Tuesday wasn't having it. She was no longer in the business of allowing possibly dangerous men to hurt her or the people she loved. Ricki was vulnerable, well meaning, and real in a way that demanded protecting. And she just didn't trust Ezra with her.

Thanks to a mix of regression therapy and self-actualization podcasts, Tuesday finally saw herself as a real person: no longer a puppet for her managers, a fantasy for her fans, or a punching bag for misogynistic tabloids. It had taken a lot of work, because she'd been indoctrinated at a young age to chase artificiality. In fact, every profile ever written about her was anchored in a very specific lie. That at five years old, she told Santa that for Christmas, she wanted to be a star.

Which was ridiculous. Tuesday never even believed in Santa. Roksana

hadn’t allowed it; she’d be damned if some red-faced *pyzaty* porker would take the credit for the gifts she saved for all year with her coat check tips.

Tuesday did remember wanting to be like *The Fresh Prince of Bel-Air*’s Ashley Banks when she grew up. But what five-year-old is qualified to make career decisions? She’d also dreamed of becoming a horse. Or working at a grocery store. Tuesday used to watch the CTown Supermarket checkout lady, mesmerized, as she packed up all their groceries, making sure each item fit just right. It was like assembling a jigsaw puzzle, just with Eggos and Lunchables! But Tuesday’s mom didn’t drive from Harlem to Hollywood to pursue a career in supermarket sales for her baby girl. No, her mom decided that TV stardom was the plan.

Poverty was on the horizon, and Roksana Roesky was no dummy.

After Tuesday was hired as a spunky cutie-pie on *Ready Freddy*, nothing was ever real again. Birthday parties? Staged. Mommy-daughter picnics? Staged. At ten, she posed for a wholesome *People* pic with her on-set teacher, who was also dealing her amphetamines on the side. At fourteen, *CosmoGirl* interviewed her about the value of natural beauty, but by then, she’d already had a nose job, her first breast augmentation, and every errant hair lasered from her body. At sixteen, her prom date was an up-and-coming actor represented by her manager, who arranged the whole thing and promised the twenty-three-year-old “full access.” Even her short marriage to the closeted NBA player was one of her manager’s genius ideas. He felt her image needed rehabilitation after she’d started one club brawl too many.

No one ever asked why she was always fighting. Or why she was so angry. Tuesday starred in a hit show and dozens of TV movies and held down major cosmetics contracts. She should’ve been happy! And even after she exposed her sleazy manager for sexual harassment, no one cared. No one even believed her. *She* was punished; he wasn’t.

Whenever Tuesday heard people say “Well-behaved

women rarely make history," she wondered who they were talking about. She'd been a traumatized kid who stood up to one of the most powerful talent managers in the business. And that made history, all right, just not the good kind. She was suddenly unclean, unreliable, and unhirable: a lying Black slut making a fuss at the wrong time, years before the #MeToo movement might've made her a hero. The culture had relitigated Britney, Lindsay, and Paris.

When would it be her turn?

That was what her memoir was for. If she'd ever finish writing the damned thing. Why was she overthinking it? No one was expecting "Letter from a Birmingham Jail." She simply had to tell her story. Set the record straight.

It certainly wasn't about the money. Her advance from the publisher was negligible. But these days, Tuesday didn't need much. She made a comfortable living off residuals and filmed commercials overseas sometimes. She had a few friends—her esthetician and the woman who did her lashes. But when she met Ricki, that was a platonic love at first sight. They were kindred spirits, each requiring the other to be nothing but exactly herself. And Ricki needed a friend as badly as Tuesday did.

The two had a lot in common, but one thing that Ricki was, and Tuesday wasn't, was naive. She was dangerously smitten with this Ezra character. But clearly, he was hiding something. And Tuesday was determined to uncover the truth.

There was only one way to do it. She'd pretend to be a city inspector and wheedle her way into Ezra Walker's house on an evidence-gathering mission.

He's left me no choice, thought Tuesday, adding the finishing touches to her makeup: an extremely light beat meant to complement the city inspector uniform she'd bought half-price at the New York Police Shop way out in Queens.

Tuesday already knew how to hustle her way into a house, and it didn't involve holding anyone up at gunpoint or breaking through windows. Nothing nutty. Based on her turn as a teen burglar in the 2006 Lifetime holiday flick *Season's Thievings*, she knew how to make a break-in the perfect victimless crime.

The first thing was to ascertain when Ezra wouldn't be home. Not hard. For the past four days, she'd disguised herself in a massive puffer, a Yankees cap, and sunglasses and discreetly patrolled Ezra's block to get the lay of the land. She'd discovered the following:

Every day, around 11:00 a.m., Ezra left the house

carrying a mysterious bag of dog food. He came home around 3:00 p.m. and sometimes had a mammoth husky with him. Where does one go for that long in the middle of the workday? Did he work, even? And was that XXL-sized beast a

domesticated dog or a fucking wolf? It looked like Falkor from *The NeverEnding Story*.

Even odder still, one time she followed him into a Walgreens and, from two aisles over, watched him walking slowly through the store. Staring at the endless options of shaving cream, toothpaste, and Hallmark cards, studying them but never buying anything. It made no sense.

Tuesday also discovered that, as was the case with so many owners of New York City brownstones, he lived on the top floors and rented the ground floor to tenants. She'd spotted the renter through the window—a young woman, maybe a college student? She was always home.

That was all the info Tuesday needed to charm her way inside. If the tenant was as young as she looked, there was a chance she wouldn't recognize Tuesday. Then, if luck was on Tuesday's side—and if she knew her Edwardian-era Harlem brownstones—there might be a servants' stairwell in the back of the house that would lead upstairs. A secret passageway, as it were. Most likely, there'd be a door atop the stairwell leading to Ezra's duplex, and it'd probably be locked. But she knew how to pick a lock, too. All it took was a credit card and patience.

Ezra Walker was going down.

"Hello, can I help you?"

It was 12:15 p.m., and Tuesday had just rung the doorbell at Ezra's house. It was perfect. He wasn't home, but the first-floor tenant was. She was an athletic-looking blonde wearing Columbia University joggers.

"I'm so sorry to bother you on this fine day," Tuesday said with a bright smile. It was clear that the tenant had no idea who she was. "My name is Scarlett Johannesburg, and I'm with the New York City Department of Inspection. There was a hydrant leak in the area, and I'm looking at all the residential water… uh… systems on the block."

"Ohhh, I hadn't heard," said the blonde.

Out of the corner of her eye, Tuesday watched the tenant quickly survey her jumpsuit, clipboard, and top-handle

satchel of “tools.” She bought the whole thing.

“Yeah, I need to check the building’s sinks, tubs, and toilets for leaks. All your, um, faucet valve… miscellanea. I know it’s an inconvenience,

but…”

“No, you’re fine! It’s just, my landlord isn’t here. I’m a renter.”

Tuesday riffled through the papers on her clipboard. “Hmm. Seems I don’t have any tenants listed, only the owner. Mr. Ezra Walker?”

“That’s right.”

“Cool, cool, cool. And your name is?”

“I’m Beck.” She smiled brightly, tipping her head to the side.

“Hi, Beck!” Tuesday smiled and tipped her head, too. When researching her role in *Season’s Thievings*, Tuesday learned that the way to earn a stranger’s confidence was to repeat their name. And mirror their body language. It bred a feeling of familiarity.

“Beck, if you don’t mind, I’ll just conduct a quick search of the building.
Fifteen minutes, tops.”

A few beats later, Beck had let Tuesday into the house to issue a fake inspection of her apartment, which was decorated with an assortment of slightly faded hand-me-down furniture, probably from her parents’ second homes or summer estates. Beck’s family was most assuredly wealthy—how else did she live in a fancy brownstone as opposed to shitty student housing?

“I’ll just wait in the kitchen, Ms. Johannesburg,” said Beck, who trailed Tuesday into a cute breakfast nook. “I’m studying for our psychopharmacology midterms. Exam life, *ugh*.”

“Education first, kiddo,” Tuesday called out to her, grateful that there was a carpet runner down the long hallway to mask the creakiness of the old wooden floorboards, so Beck couldn’t tell where she was in the house. A good thing, since she’d already tiptoed down the hall, past two huge bedrooms, to a discreet door in the back of the house.

The old servants’ stairwell. She didn’t have a lot of time now. She quickly looked over her shoulder, and there was no sign of Beck.

Tuesday slipped through the door, gently closing it behind her. The stairwell was old, dusty, a little cobwebby. She unlaced her boots, ripped them off, and tiptoed up in her socks. And there it was: the door to Ezra’s portion of the house. Of course, it was locked.

Preemptively grinning to herself triumphantly, she swiftly and easily picked the lock with the expired Amex she used as a sharp edge to trace her liquid liner. After a few targeted wiggles of the card, she heard a *pop!* and

the door silently fell open.

It was the strangest home she'd ever seen. The place had beautiful bones, for sure.

But there was nothing in there. It was just a collection of clean, sterile rooms, with a few nondescript chairs and a cheap pop-up outdoor table, the kind you find in the CVS seasonal aisle in summer. No art or photos on the wall, barely any personal effects. Did Ezra really live here? Did anyone? Moving fast, Tuesday lightly trotted up and down the stairs of the duplex, searching for clues, but there was barely any sign of life. A few expensive toiletries in the bathroom, a suitcase of clothes. And none of this did anything to quell her suspicion that Ezra was shady as hell.

Tuesday had told Beck she needed just fifteen minutes. She checked her phone and saw that she had seven minutes left. Now perspiring from nerves, she hustled up to the top floor to do one more sweep and realized that she'd missed a room.

Tuesday held her breath, pushing open the door.

Where the rest of the house was blankly impersonal, this room—this *one* room—was frozen somewhere in the past. Frozen many places in the past. Like the contents of an attic in an abandoned house, it was a jumble of old relics dating from the past century. A thick layer of dust had settled on everything. There were ancient journals piled onto an old-timey writing desk, rolled-up rugs. Suits from long-ago decades, a collection of hats. There were three televisions made from wood, with tall rabbit-ear antennas. Stacks upon stacks of records were piled up against one wall.

Nearby was a tangled jumble of old, beat-up dog collars. She wondered if he was into some BDSM shit. Tuesday peered closer at the collars. Dangling from each was a rusted tin tag engraved with a name. GROUCHO BARX. DROOLIUS CAESAR. JAMES EARL BONES.

Looking around, Tuesday realized what was unsettling. While all the pieces were outdated, they were all from different eras: A 1930s Victrola, a '50s record player, a '70s

turntable for 45s, a 2000s stereo. A Walkman, a Discman, an iPod. A slide projector, an early cable TV box, a VCR. A typewriter, a word processor, a laptop. Various retro phones, ranging from 1920s top-handle rotaries to slim push-buttons from the ’90s. In a far corner was a box of ancient kitchen gadgets, midcentury blenders and toasters, and

a clunky oversized 1980s-style microwave.

It was a collision of disparate times, giving Tuesday the uneasy feeling of being everywhere and nowhere at once.

And there, carefully piled on top of the writing desk, was a stack of papers. Holding in a cough from the dust, Tuesday rushed over to examine them. It was sheet music. The first paper was filled with musical notes scrawled in pencil. So was the next one. And the next, and the next. The farther she got into the stack, the older the pages became, yellowed, cracking, and the pencil marks faded with time. Tuesday couldn't read sheet music, but even her untrained eye could tell that each sheet was different. But the handwriting was identical on every page. And each sheet had the same title—"UNFINISHED FOR HER"—followed by a date.

And the dates were impossible. The years spanned practically a century, but the month was always February. Even stranger, along the margins of every page were snippets of stream-of-consciousness thoughts that seemed to be hastily, frantically scrawled. Tuesday couldn't make out what it all meant.

> 2/21/1932: More jumbled melodies.
> 2/16/1944: Haunted by disparate chords, adding up to nothing. 2/1/1952: February again. More mismatched sounds.
> 2/3/1972: Stalked by the wrong notes, again. 2/19/1984: Half-remembered, unreachable sounds.
> 2/11/2004: Up all night dreaming of dissonant chords. No rhyme, no reason.
> 2/9/2012: Music is stupid. I should've been an

accountant. But the top sheet read:

> 2/1/2024: She was there. In the garden. And I felt her there, in my bones, before I even saw her. I looked into her face and lost my composure. Like the atoms holding me together exploded outwards, in every

direction. I fucking ran. But before I did… in the lightning- fast moment our eyes met… something miraculous happened. The notes in my brain started falling together. I could almost reach the melody, after all this time. But I’ll never reach her, not fully. And it’s

my cross to forever bear.

Tuesday blinked, blank-faced. She was caught between confusion and a creeping sense of doom. If this was Ezra's handwriting, he sounded like a madman. What the hell kind of trouble was Ricki in?

Tuesday whipped her phone out of her pocket and snapped as many photos as she could. And then she carefully put everything back in place and slipped out of the room, shutting the door behind her.

But not before noticing Ali's portrait of Ricki propped in a far corner.

Moving quietly, heart thundering, she slipped back downstairs into the tenant's apartment. Hoisting her tote of tools, she rushed to the front door.

"I'm off to the next house, Beck!" exclaimed Tuesday. "Good luck on your midterms!"

By the time she answered, Tuesday was long gone. And Beck never realized she'd been smoothly gamed by the winner of the Teen Choice Award for Choice TV Actress, Comedy, in 2008, 2009, and 2010—who, apparently, still had it.

Della needed a dose of beauty today. She was sitting on a bench outside of West Harlem Hospital's main entrance. The wind breezed past her, carrying the scent of leather from the shoe repair shop across the street. Della could see the narrow old shop with razor-sharp clarity, thanks to the invention of progressive lenses. So many of the newer inventions were useless, like Crocs and natural deodorant, but progressive lenses were a game changer.

At least I lived long enough for my eyes to reap their benefits, she thought.

She noticed that bright, whimsical wildflowers were woven throughout the shoe repair shop's wrought-iron

gate. Even from that distance, she could tell they were Ricki’s flowers.

Ricki was still leaving her expensive, unsold arrangements at long-dead landmarks around town. But for the past few days, the flowers hadn’t stayed put at these lost historical sites. A curious thing started to happen. The

bouquets were being discovered not only on Instagram, but with delight by local residents. Passersby began deconstructing her bouquets and then decorating the neighborhood with smaller clusters. Repurposed flower displays began ornamenting the exteriors of local statues, plazas, schools, churches, and public housing complexes. Then they posted pics of their handiwork on social media with #WildeThings.

My word, that girl's making quite a mark, thought Della proudly. It felt good to know that her new granddaughter would be all right.

Della was waiting for her Lyft, sitting on the bench, accompanied by her new home aide, Naaz. As she'd later tell her deceased husband, Dr. Bennett, during their nightly chats (she couldn't bring herself to call them prayers), Naaz was a hoot. A young, plucky Bangladeshi American woman with a Bay Ridge accent and a Lana Del Rey biceps tattoo, she'd been assigned to Della a few hours before. Naaz's job was to keep her comfortable at home as she battled her bleak diagnosis.

Della's Lyft pulled up, but she just wanted to sit outside for five more minutes. To feel the brisk, cool air against her skin. To watch life happening. Cars were honking. People were milling about, gathering the courage to visit their sick loved ones. Hospital staff rushed back from their lunch breaks at Sweetgreen, clutching biodegradable bags of twenty-dollar salad. Life was happening everywhere.

For eight years, she'd known this day would come.

Della was diagnosed with lung cancer in 2016. It wasn't excruciating to live with, though the chemo was unpleasant, of course. And she lost her hair. But when it started growing back, she realized the short 'fro suited her. Dr. Bennett was with her then, and she was back in fighting shape within a year. She still swam three times a week and power-strolled with the Links Elder Steppers Walking Club. But the doctors had warned her that her cancer wasn't gone; it was just at bay—and one day, it would, in fact, kill her.

But for the time being, she was alive. Which was a gift. It

gave her space to think about what she wanted.

When she was first diagnosed, an obscene new president had just been elected, and she was worried about her and Dr. Bennett staying in Georgia. She knew that the POTUS's wild-eyed hate speech had the potential to rustle up the evils that knitted the country together. A mob of delusional

yahoo yokels could turn their woefully misplaced rage into violence at any moment. And she refused to be in the wrong place at the wrong time. Especially if her time was limited.

She wanted to move to Harlem. It was a place she'd always romanticized, for many reasons, secret and close to her heart, not the least of which was the first picture show she ever saw, *Swing!*, back when she was barely eleven. The movie was about Mandy, a woman in Birmingham, Alabama, who quits her job cooking for a white family and flees to Harlem to be a cabaret singer. To Della, a serious, poised girl raised by a poorly paid domestic worker grandmother in the Deep South, it was a cage- rattling, Edenic fantasy.

Atlanta was wonderful, and she'd loved her life there. But the tides were turning. And in her remaining years, she wanted to taste Mandy's freedom.

Dr. Bennett didn't share her fears. He wasn't frightened of much and couldn't imagine some fool in the White House dictating where he lived. But he loved Della with every ounce of his stubborn, endearingly bossy body. And he owed it to her to help her realize this dream. Lord knew she'd supported his whims for the past seventy years, from being the receptionist at his first practice to throwing the Atlanta Neurology Coalition's spring gala every year.

Dr. Bennett arranged for her to move into her dream brownstone. And then he died.

Why did he get to pass so quickly? thought Della, the wind whipping her cheeks. One fatal heart attack in his sleep, and he was gone. She didn't know which was more preferable—knowing that your body was winding down, or disappearing in a flash. It must be nice to just be taken. Without stewing over it, obsessing, and preparing. Forever wondering when.

Now Della had a "when."

She continued to have visions of beloved, long-dead friends and family members when she was on the edge of sleep. Or if her eyes unfocused a bit while she was reading. Still no Dr. Bennett, as much as it broke her heart. God,

what she wouldn’t give to see him. She needed him now.

But Della knew that a heavenly hand controlled who she encountered, and she needed to trust its divine timing. Because the night before, she’d had a warm, welcoming vision that she couldn’t have imagined on her own. In her dreams, she was holding all seven of her miscarried babies. The ones

her “inhospitable” womb couldn’t house. She cuddled each of them close, stroking their velvety, powder-soft new skin, and they nestled into the crook of her arm. And then, for the first time, she wasn’t sad about having lost them. She’d be seeing them soon. They were happy. And waiting for her.

Today, Della’s doctor told her that most terminal patients started seeing the people they’d loved and lost when it was almost their time to go. It eased the transition. She knew she’d see Dr. Bennett soon. Sometimes, she wondered if Nana would appear to her. She supposed not. In life, Nana had been ice cold and had expressed nothing but relief when Della married and moved to Atlanta. No reason to think that she’d be a calming guide into the afterlife.

Della also doubted that her parents would show up in her dreams. Her father was a mystery: no name, no photograph, no nothing. She did have an idea of what her mother looked like, since Nana had a photograph of her. But she never knew her. When she thought of her mother, which was rarely, all she felt was a resentment that had hardened like a callus. A grudge. Besides, the doctor had said people that she *loved* would reveal themselves to her.

She wished that she had control over when she died. That she could schedule it on the calendar, the way women these days scheduled C- sections. Della was a planner. Living each day, never knowing if it would be her last? That felt torturous, inhumane. So she decided not to share her prognosis with anyone. She’d just add this to the list of secrets she kept close to her heart. There was no reason for Ricki to grieve her before she was gone. Or Su, or any of her friends. It was *her* business, and in six months, maybe a year, she would die.

Or maybe before then. Who could know?

She coughed hard into her elbow and then shut her eyes, allowing the brisk air to sweep across her skin. She had no regrets. From now until her final day, she’d breathe.

CHAPTER 15

YOU'RE THE BEE'S KNEES, BREEZE

February 27–29,
1928 Leap Day

Breeze Walker and Felice Fabienne had been dating for three months. And it was a scandal.

Ordinarily, he was smart about women. It was tough to imagine that only five years before, he'd had to rehearse what to say to them. But back then, when he was a new émigré to New York City, everything made him self-conscious: his lack of education, his almost unintelligible accent. Not knowing the latest lingo or the right car to drive. But he was a quick study.

All those nights partying in Harlem, he quietly observed how people talked to each other: women and men, men and men, women and women. He noticed that when straight fellas spoke to ladies, they seemed to be talking to a different species. Once a man was attracted to a woman, she became a conquest, a challenge, an idea. Most men didn't seem to like women very much.

He'd grown up with mismatched parents whose only commonality (besides music) was liking each other. Hazel Walker was the funniest person in Fallon County. A quick-witted spark who loved to dance and play the ukulele, she

was *not* the person to sit next to at services if you hoped to keep a straight face. But Big Ezra Walker? He was a serious, burdened man who loved his family and his harmonica but had no use for levity.

Despite their opposing personalities, Breeze saw how his dad treated his mom like an equal, a person. A treasure. He pulled out her chair. He held her when her monthlies hurt. He sat on the porch with her, chatting into the night. This was rare. His cousin Sonny's dad would come in from the fields, frayed, speaking with his fists and faithful only to the bottle. Breeze supposed it was hard to be civil when your own humanity was in tatters. Accordingly, Sonny's mom wasn't safe in her own home, but she swallowed her discontent. No one liked an ornery woman.

Breeze learned a lot about women at the speakeasies, but his education started back at home. Which was why his girlfriend, Felice Fabienne, was a curiosity. Quietly, he wasn't sure if he actually liked her. She wasn't particularly kind or sweet. She had mercurial, unpredictable moods, and she was motivated by money, fame, fashion, and social status. God help whoever got in her way.

But Felice was a game he was addicted to playing. Pleasing her wasn't easy, and when he earned an approving smile, he felt like a king. Her greedy, spontaneous sexuality was a rush. She was gentle with Sonny's hand-me-down terrier, Groucho Barx. And Felice depended on Breeze to help her navigate her new adopted city, which satisfied his caretaker spirit in intoxicating ways. For better or worse, he was swept up in her hurricane. She raged into his life at a dark, empty time, right before Sonny permanently disappeared.

With Sonny most likely dead—a thought that tore his heart to ribbons— Breeze was desperate to forget his pain. Felice's black hole of volatility did for him what drinking and drugging did for everyone else.

Lo Ellis, Eden Lounge's choreographer and Breeze's best friend, thought he'd lost his damned mind. She told him so at the engagement party for W.
E. B. Du Bois's daughter, Yolande, and her fiancé, the famous poet Countee Cullen.

Lo was scandalized that Breeze was bringing Felice to the April wedding. It was sure to be the event of the decade! Yes, two socialites were marrying, but even more

deliciously, the best man was Harold Jackman, an aristocrat known internationally as “Harlem’s most handsome man.” Unfortunately for the bride, he was also the groom’s boyfriend.

“I feel bad for all three of them,” said Breeze, tossing back seltzers with Lo at the engagement party. “Poor Countee.”

“What’s he supposed to do, marry Harold?” Lo was chic in a feathered hair comb and a beaded frock skimming her knees. She felt the lovers’ pain. If she could’ve married her ex-girlfriend, Behold, she would’ve a thousand times over. “He’d be a pretty bride, though.”

“Tell me again why I agreed to play at this farce of a wedding?”

Lo chuckled. “Cause Yolande invited twelve hundred moneyed New Negroes, they love your songs, and you love the attention.”

What I love, he thought, *is that she didn’t ask Duke.*

“Hey, if no one’s listening, I’m not eating.” He grinned. “Did you hear they commissioned Langston to write the wedding poem?”

Lo rolled her eyes. “How do I love thee? Let me count the gays.” “Let me *Countee* the gays,” quipped Breeze.

“Don’t change the subject. We’re talking about you and Felice. Why her? She’s tacky.”

“She’s a chorus girl!” he retorted. “You were a chorus girl, too.”

“But she got the job through wickedness! She was an understudy. Out the clear blue, Edith, my star dancer, breaks an ankle during practice, and Felice muscles in.” Lo shook her head. “Ain’t no way. Edith’s so careful with her feet, she practically levitates around town. Never even stubbed a toe. Felice put the roots on her. Don’t fool with them Creole girls.”

“All right now, you ain’t gotta besmirch her character.” “But what do you even know about her?”

Breeze knew a lot, actually. Felice was raised in Thibodaux, Louisiana, a moss-hung swamp that was more poverty stricken than poor. She and her mama lived in a cramped one-room tin-roof shack. The hovel heaved in strong winds and flooded in the rain. It was miserable, and so was Felice’s mama, whose fiancé had run off when she was seven months pregnant, leaving behind his Bible and no explanation. And her mama never recovered. Lost to

blues, she couldn’t work, laugh, or even get out of bed on most days. Mama was a dried-up husk of a woman, and all because some lowlife wouldn’t marry her. Felice would never be that helpless.

Breeze also knew she’d been born with a gift. (Well, she was born with a caul over her face, which lent itself to a gift.) As a tot, she spent most of her time wandering the wild, swampy woods alone, teaching herself botanical magic. At first, Felice honed her root medicine skills on injured possums and rats, and by ten, she was a bona fide hoodoo practitioner, earning a

living for her and her mama by curing colds and healing scrapes.

Until February of her thirteenth year. Felice told Breeze she'd been gathering comfrey for a black eye salve when she found an oddly shaped book with a muddy cover, nestled under a weeping willow. The title read *Grimoire of Bad Work*. In other words, a book of dark voodoo spells. Who left it there, she didn't know, but after sitting in the dirt, reading it cover to cover, Felice had an epiphany. Hoodoo rootwork helped other people. But voodoo (the dark kind, not the good) would help *her*, specifically, to remove obstacles blocking her from her dream.

And that dream was Broadway. Felice was obsessed with dancing. Every Friday night, she'd practice the latest moves at the jook joints, where boys loved her, but girls accused her of terrible things: theft, drunkenness, and getting pregnant by some photographer passing through town. Well, that last rumor was true. Felice had a baby she'd named after her idol, the showgirl Adelaide Hall, who'd starred in the all-Black Broadway productions of *Shuffle Along* and *Runnin' Wild* in the early '20s. Adelaide was a petite beauty with a wide smile, just like Felice.

Last year, at nineteen, Felice escaped to Harlem, leaving her baby back home and planning to send for her once she'd hit it big. Until that day, she was on the rise, and woe befell anyone in her way. To hear her tell it, she had voodoo to thank. After eight months of diligently chanting and offering sacrifices to loa spirits, Felice had gone from an Eden Lounge understudy to a showgirl. Who was dating the *bandleader*.

Breeze didn't believe in magic. But he was bewitched by her fantastical stories, and the fact that *she* believed them. Plus, when she was sweet, her Kewpie-doll smile softened every one of Breeze's rough edges. And generally, he didn't even mind her dark, stormy moods. Keeping up with her tornado-like disposition was a distraction from his own melancholy.

Lo was right; Louisiana girls did have a reputation: folks said if you cross one, prepare to be bankrupt and impotent.

But Breeze thought her spells were a cute hobby. Like astrology.

And he told Lo as much.

“Listen, baby,” said Lo, taking an elegant drag from her cigarette holder. “Sex with deranged women is tops. But Felice’s wicked streak is not to be toyed with…”

Breeze stopped listening. He realized he had only thirty minutes to walk

Groucho Barx before meeting Felice for their date. He couldn't be late. When she was displeased, her sweetness curdled into something dark. He kissed Lo on the cheek and was gone so fast, her head spun.

The next day, after Breeze took Felice to see a matinee of the new Chaplin picture, *The Circus*, the two went for a lazy stroll down Lenox. The avenue teemed with bustling boutiques and restaurants, but no one really went to Lenox to shop. It was about being seen. Spats and hats, stoles and satin, the thoroughfare was a fashion magazine brought to life. Trends were born and died on Lenox. Breeze was dapper in a tailored pin-striped suit, and Felice wore a lilac drop-waist frock and a full-length silver fox coat, both gifts from her indulgent boyfriend.

The late-February afternoon was cold as hell, though. And if Breeze felt it, Felice must've been freezing. She wasn't wearing stockings (because she was liberated) or a hat (because she wanted to flaunt her waves courtesy of Madam C. J. Walker's salon).

"Are you warm enough,

Felice?" "I'm fine, sugar."

"Well, my fingers are frozen. I got a rent party tonight, and I can't play with Popsicles."

Felice winked up at him. "I'll warm up your hands real nice at the party."

By 1928, Breeze was a staple at rent parties. When tenants were struggling to pay rent, they'd host parties in their private homes, charge a modest cover, and hire top-billed musicians to draw a crowd. Rent parties were not only a fucking great time, but also a lucrative source of backup income for established musicians, especially pianists, who set the tone on the dance floor. And extra cash was very important to Breeze, whose lady had expensive tastes.

For a clotheshorse and an avid traveler, Breeze was on the frugal side. He'd made only two truly major, life-changing purchases since he'd started making money: his

brownstone in Strivers' Row and his piano, an elegant Steinway constructed from rosewood. A square piano, ultra-rare and tuned to his precise specifications. That piano was his baby.

And because the hosts of tonight's rent party didn't own one, he'd hired

a friend with a truck to drive his perfect piano to the house.

Breeze blew hot air on his fingers and kept strolling. Just then, three lookers on the chorus line with Felice, resplendent in cloche hats and sable- trimmed wraps, sauntered by Breeze, offering flirty hellos. Felice stood by his side, posed haughtily in her finery, and waited for an acknowledgment that never came.

The trio swept right by her. One of them even knocked into her, with no apology.

Cheeks aflame with humiliation, Felice lunged after them, words and fists flying. Quickly, Breeze grabbed her around the waist, half dragging her into a nearby alley.

“Felice! You dance with those girls; you can’t call them knock-kneed syphilitic whores!”

“Who can’t?” She was fuming. “Fuck them and fuck you, too.”

“Me?” Felice was cute, but he hadn’t escaped hell to be cursed at by a hotheaded hoofer in diamonds that *he’d* bought. “That’s enough, now. Simmer down.”

“Fine,” she huffed.

“There’s families and kids out there. You want folks to talk?”

“But those bitches cut me dead. In public, like I’m nothing. Who do they think they are?”

“Definitely not syphilitic whores,” said Breeze lightly. “Yeah, they were rude. But they won’t be the last ones to doubt you. Hold your head up. Remember who you are.”

Felice pulled away, her bottom lip quivering. “So, you haven’t heard?” “Haven’t heard what?”

“About the photograph.” She pressed her fist against her mouth, choking back sobs. “The photograph of me without… without any clothes on. Somehow, it’s back to haunt me.”

“When did you take photographs without your clothes on?”

“I was a kid.” She was openly weeping now. “A New Orleans photographer was in town, and he saw me, and… well, I didn’t think it was a big deal. He said he’d show them to vaudeville producers who could get me auditions

for blue shows. *Dirty* shows. I… I needed the money."

Breeze was enraged. Young Felice had clearly been preyed upon, and he knew options were limited for girls like her. He'd never judge her for trying

to improve her life. No one should.

“It’s all right. Shhh, don’t fret, now.” He wrapped his arm around her as she sobbed.

“Folks are talking. I went to two auditions yesterday? The directors wouldn’t see me.”

“On account of nude photographs? Half the showgirls we know have posed nude.”

“But when they do it, it’s art,” she said, sniffling. “It’s Van Der Zee or Van Vechten behind the camera. It’s fancy and scholarly, and Alain Locke publishes essays about it. But because trashy little Felice did it in a swamp, with a sleazy photographer who tricked a young girl, it’s bad.”

“I’ll talk to Lo,” Breeze assured her. “She’ll make sure the other dancers are nice to you.”

“Sure, Breeze, but you can’t strong-arm every casting agent in town. Maybe… maybe I oughta try Hollywood. Joanie Crawford did nudie pictures, and she’s a huge star now.”

“She’s not Colored, Felice. In Hollywood, you’d play her servant or her slave, if you’re lucky.” Breeze had heard that LA brothels were populated by white girls who were beauty queens back home but, after moving out west, were told they were too chubby, snaggletoothed, or uncharismatic for the big screen. What happened to Colored women who couldn’t find work?

“Tell you what,” started Breeze. “I know everybody in town; I’ll find out who has the picture and buy it. Then I’ll track down the photographer and buy the film. All right?”

Tears streaking her rouged cheeks, Felice fixed him with her fluttery- lashed smile and huge, pleased eyes. And just like that, her thunderstorm passed, and the sun shone bright.

“You’re the bee’s knees, Breeze.” She stood on her tiptoes and nibbled on his earlobe, her hand traveling down the front of his pants. “You’d do that for me?”

Of course he would. Why be successful if he couldn’t help people he cared for? He’d lost Sonny, his last surviving family member. Breeze no longer had anyone to help.

Just as he was about to tell her this, she got distracted. Gasping, she turned to face the sidewalk. “Is that… Oh my word… Is that…”

It was Adelaide Hall. *The* Adelaide Hall, of Broadway musical fame.

Stopping to speak to a fan, she looked like the Platonic ideal of a modern woman, wearing a mink and a lacquered bob. Delighted, Felice clasped her hands together under her chin.

“Her gown’s by a Parisian designer, I reckon. Chanel? Lanvin? I wonder if it’s a Worth.”

“It’s a-worth plenty,” cracked Breeze.

Felice scanned her from head to toe, settling on her luminous four-strand pearl bracelet.

“Breeze, look! Why, if I had a bracelet like that, I might be the happiest girl alive.”

She purred the words with bald eroticism, reaching backward to rub her hand up and down the front of Breeze’s pants. Abruptly, she spun around and pushed him farther back into the shadows of the alley and up against a wall. Right then and there, Felice dropped to her knees and sucked him off, mere feet away from civilized café society.

God, he’d come so far from Fallon County. Getting head from a gorgeous cabaret dancer at 4:00 p.m. off Lenox? If that wasn’t cosmopolitan, he didn’t know what was.

And it was why, between dropping Felice off at rehearsal and prepping for the rent party, Breeze was inspired to visit a jeweler to buy a replica of Adelaide’s flashy pearl bracelet.

225½ West 137th Street. It was an odd address, neither here nor there. An in-between house definitely befitting a party starting at midnight on February 29, the weirdest day of the year. Leap day.

The tenants lived on the ground floor of a stone-gray brownstone with dramatic bay windows. The parlor was the scene of the soiree, and to make space for dancing, they’d moved all the furniture to a corner. There were buckets of bootleg gin and whiskey (Prohibition’s finest), a rug, and damn near fifty-five pairs of feet stomping the house down.

Breeze and his square piano were in the center of it all.

For hours, he banged his keys with ease, pulling the strings of every flapper, cook,

gangster, porter, and painter in the place. He had the crowd in a chokehold, providing the beat, the rhythm, and the throbbing undercurrent that stoked their Dionysian delights.

Happy! Sad! So good to be bad!

Breeze watched the ecstatic rush overtake the crowd, the wild abandon in their faces, pleased to be the architect of it all. It was 3:00 a.m., and the whole place smelled like gin, tobacco, reefer, Chanel No. 5, and sweat: Eau de Rent Party, 1928. And now Breeze's hands ached. Good thing one of his Friday Knights was on hand to fill in for him while he took a break.

Felice was acting strange. Her dancing was frenetic, chaotic, like a conjure woman raising the dead. All night, she danced the Charleston madly through the crowd, pausing every so often to peck Ezra on the lips as he sat behind his piano. This was more territorial than anything else. When she kissed him, it was passionless, her expression terrifyingly blank. Every so often she'd stop dancing to lurk in a far corner, slowly peeling off her nail varnish, her eyes darting around the room as red flakes pooled around her feet.

Happy! Sad! So good to be bad!

She looked enticing, all gussied up with rouged cheeks, lips, and knees. But as with most things Felice-related, it was a cover. Something was wrong. He'd seen her act like this before, most recently after a white shopgirl ignored them at Lord & Taylor downtown. Felice had begun shaking violently with rage, breathing erratically, and muttering horrific blasphemies. Breeze had rushed her home, humming to her and rocking her in his arms.

Her manic episodes were scary, and Breeze feared she might hurt herself or someone else. But he felt for her, too. And maybe, deep down, he envied the way she felt everything. His feelings were tucked away, calcifying inside him. But Felice accessed her rage with a terrifying immediacy. She let it out. Her emotions didn't eat her from the inside out, the way his did.

He came up behind Felice and kissed her cheek. "Let's

go to the roof for a minute.”

She beamed, all lashes and empty flirtation. “I thought you’d never ask.” He grabbed her fur and his overcoat and hat, and they snuck out into the freezing February night.

Breeze pulled down the fire escape in the back of the building and lifted Felice up onto it. Together, they climbed up to the

flat unfinished roof. There was no railing, just a chimney pumping swirling plumes of smoke into the night sky.

The full moon was red. Fire red, and Felice was—as she liked to call herself—a voodoo chile. Ezra wouldn't forget the vivid image of that moon as long as he lived.

She stood there, wrapped in her furs, hugging herself. Her face was curiously blank. She'd wrapped a piece of lace around her forehead, ornamenting it with costume jewels, as was the fashion. She could've passed for a child playing dress-up. At twenty, she'd lived enough lives to be forty, but at times, she reminded Ezra of a helpless kid.

Breeze stepped closer to her. "Felice, are you feeling poorly?"

Calmly, she averted her eyes and backed away from him. "I'm all right, why?"

"Good…" Ezra felt a foreboding sense of doom but carried on with his plan. "I wanted to give you something."

He'd intended to give her the present after the party; it would be the perfect ending to a night on the town. But he'd decided now was better. A gift might shake her out of her state.

"Breeze!" Hope flashed behind her eyes. "How kind of you, darlin'.
What for?"

He shrugged, turning on the charm. "Do I need a reason? You're my girl."

"My hero." A tear tracked down her cheek.

Walking up to her, Breeze pulled a small box out of his coat pocket and placed it in her hand. Her eyes flew open, wide. "Open it."

She did, hungrily. It was a four-strand pearl bracelet, just like the one Adelaide Hall had been wearing earlier that day. It was the most elegant piece of jewelry he'd ever seen.

He'd thought that giving her Adelaide's bracelet would make her the happiest girl alive, just like she'd said. But she wasn't happy. In slow motion, her expression sharpened. Her glare speared through him, like a knife.

"A bracelet?" she spit with palpable loathing. Her voice

quieted to a dangerous whisper. “I thought it’d be a ring.”

“You… you don’t like it? It’s the one…”

“I know, the one Adelaide Hall was wearing. I know. *I know.* But I

thought… I thought you asked me up here to marry me. Breeze, you don't bring your girl to the roof in the middle of the night saying you have a gift, and then it's not an engagement ring."

He sputtered, confused. They were having two different conversations, on two different planets. "But we never talked about getting married. Were you expecting—"

"Why won't you marry me?" She shrieked this at him, pacing maniacally. "You got another woman? I see how the girls at Eden Lounge hang on you. Those vultures, hungry for what's mine. No one respects me in this town. Including my own fella. But I ain't Mama. I won't let a man ruin my life." She stopped in front of him. "You're a liar and a cheat."

Breeze was neither of those things. He knew exactly what he was: a man who was smitten with his lady but had certainly never promised marriage. But Felice had a thunderous, unpredictable look on her face, and he didn't want to worsen her mood.

"Will you take the bracelet?" Gently, he held her wrist and slipped it over her hand. The glossy pearls shone in the darkness. "See? It looks beautiful on you."

She stared down at the bracelet, bitter tears streaming from her eyes. "Breeze…"

"Yes?" He held his breath.

"Lo fired me from the chorus line. You told me you'd tell her to get the girls on my side. But she fired me instead, Breeze. She fired me!"

"Why?"

"One of those girls who snubbed me on Lenox? She… well, she fell down the stairs. Four crushed toes. She can't dance for months. Lo said I hexed her with voodoo, and she fired me."

Ezra's stomach sank, a sense of doom overtaking him. He was starting to doubt that he could turn this night around.

"Please tell me you didn't hurt her. Did you… push her down the stairs?"

"No, I used voodoo, just like Lo said." She gave him a

withering look. “That bitch had it coming.”

Breeze exhaled all the breath in his body. For the first time, he saw Felice clearly, without the haze of good sex and glamour. She was a little out of her mind. And he was a little afraid of her. Maybe he should’ve been

all along. How had he been so stupid?

“I’ll talk to Lo. Let me fix it; I’ll get you back on the line.” He had no intention of doing this, but at this point, he had to say anything to calm her.

“No. Fix it by marrying me,” she stated flatly. “And take me back home to Louisiana. We could move to New Orleans. You’re Breeze Walker, Harlem’s own. You’d do so well there. We’d be a couple of swells, hosting grand parties and getting invites to the finest homes in town. And I’d get my baby back. I miss my baby so bad.

“I thought I’d be a star by now, but it’s ruined. I hate Harlem. I miss open spaces. Swamp sounds. I can’t see the stars here. Marry me,” she pleaded. “Marry me and take me home.”

Stunned, Breeze could only shake his head. Not only was he not marrying Felice; he also didn’t want to be with her. In this moment, he clearly understood that he wanted—no, needed—to be with someone he loved. He needed a woman who’d love him back, who would take care of him just as he would take care of her.

Besides, there was zero chance of him ever returning to the South. Breeze needed the crowds, the smoke-filled dance halls, the sound he helped invent. He was allowed to be a man in Harlem. In Harlem, he was free.

“I can’t do that,” he confessed quietly. “I won’t go back. I don’t belong there.”

“You don’t love me.” It was a question disguised as a declaration.

Much later, he would realize how much of a coward he was for not responding. Felice’s anger was eruptive, and he was terrified of pushing her into madness.

But Felice was already there. Her eyes had gone stormy. Gripping the bracelet tighter and tighter, she vibrated in full-bodied fury, rooted to her spot.

“I hope you die,” she said, in an eerily calm, measured hiss. “No, no, no. I hope you *live*. Ezra 'Breeze’ Walker, I curse you with immortality. You will live forever, with no hope of escape. I know you don’t love me, but you will find true love one day. And then you’ll know the pain I feel. I

curse you with this.

“Her face will haunt your mind until you find her, Ezra. And yes, you will find her and love her. But she’ll die just like me. On the very same

day.”

And then, at 3:30 a.m. on February 29, 1928, Felice Fabienne flung herself off the roof of 225½ West 137th Street, plummeting four stories to her death.

She landed on the concrete outside the ground-floor apartment’s window. Inside, the partygoers raged on, unaware. Due to the brownstone’s shadow of tragedy, the owners moved out, it was boarded up and abandoned, and it stayed that way for over ninety years.

Eventually, the coroner packed Felice’s party dress, shoes, and bracelet in a box and sent it to her mother in Thibodaux, Louisiana. She was just one of the many starry-eyed small-town beauties who flocked to the big city, only to die unnoticed or fade into obscurity. Felice Fabienne was forgotten.

And this was how twenty-eight-year-old Ezra Walker became immortal.

CHAPTER 16

CHRONOLOGICALLY PREMIUM

February 17, 2024

This is how it ends, thought Ricki, paralyzed, as Ezra wrapped up his utterly demented tale. *This man is insane and he's going to kill me. Think fast, Ricki. What are your options? Ms. Della's at the Russian baths with Auntie Su, hitting her third bucket list item. I'm in the house alone. Call the police. No, I can't call the police on a Black man! But what if he really does try to murder me? What if I end up as the subject of a Netflix doc about a lady-killer who seduces gullible women before distracting them with some Anne Rice–ass fan-fiction backstory and choking them to death with his beautiful bare hands? I wouldn't give my sisters the satisfaction. CALL THE POLICE. No, call Tuesday. But where's my phone? Fuck, I left it in my purse up front in the shop! Okay, BREATHE. No sudden movements. Can't let him know you're scared. Jesus Christ, whyyyyyy? Haven't I been a faithful servant to you, Lord? No, you're right, I haven't. I'm heathen trash, a tawdry lapsed Catholic with ho-ish tendencies, but I'd be happy to rehabilitate if you save me, Lord. This isn't the first time good dick's gotten me in trouble, but in my defense, it's never felt like THIS, that rapturous thing people write poetry about, risk it all over, go a little bit crazy for… but I've learned my lesson, Lord. Please save me from this*

deranged psycho.

Ricki was still entangled with Ezra on the floor, her cheek still resting on his chest as the thoughts raced through her head. Was he really expecting

her to believe this? She hoped he couldn't feel the frenzied, staccato thumping of her heart. Or notice the way her whole body had stiffened in fear.

Bathed in early-morning sunlight, her studio was almost uncomfortably bright—a stark contrast to the seductive darkness of the night before. There was nowhere to hide. Ricki squeezed her eyes shut against the brightness, firecrackers of light bursting behind her lids.

She had to think fast.

For her safety, Ricki couldn't appear scared. Slowly, she disentangled herself from Ezra and sat up on her shag rug. She hoped she looked casual, which was a challenge while fully nude and perched next to a delusional lunatic. After an unbothered yawn-stretch combination that was more theatrical than she'd hoped, she grabbed the closest article of clothing— Ezra's shirt—and slipped it on. It fell to her midthigh.

"Want some water?" she asked breezily, padding across her studio to the kitchen area. Nerves frayed, she floated on her tippy-toes like Tinker Bell on the verge of a nervous breakdown.

Ezra sat up from the floor, frustratingly attractive in one sock, boxer briefs, and miles of sinewy chest. He ran a hand over his face, visibly miserable. He peered up at her with concern.

"Ricki? Are you all right?"

"I'm wonderful! Why wouldn't I be?" Her voice was several octaves higher than normal. With strenuous calm, Ricki pulled a pitcher of filtered water from the fridge and set it on the counter. She poured the water into a glass. And then, with her back to Ezra, she slowly reached into a junk drawer under the sink filled with loose change, a discontinued Fenty lipstick, Pantone chips, matches, and two broken curling irons. She grabbed one in each hand and then whipped around to face him, crossing the curling irons into a makeshift crucifix.

Ezra's eyes flew open in surprise.

He stood up. "Don't. Move," growled

Ricki.

He sat back down on the floor.

Wielding the hair tools in front of her, Ricki approached him. “I don’t want to hurt you.”

“What are you…”

“THE POWER OF CHRIST COMPELS YOU!” she screamed, thrusting

the curling irons at him.

"You don't need to do this, Ricki." "Are you a vampire?"

"A *vampire*?" he groaned with a world-weary sigh. "Let's not make this worse than it is. Vampires subsist on blood and have supernatural powers; they're monsters. All we have in common is immortality. Vampires are dead people who are given life. Perennials are living people who can't die." And then, in a hurt tone, he added, "I know you didn't mean it, but it's… actually insulting and demeaning to call us vampires. It's not politically correct."

"Oh, pardon me."

Sighing, Ezra tried to stand up again.

"Take one step closer to me and I'll end you."

"What're you gonna do, curl me to death? I can't die!" Looking defeated, Ezra sat back down.

Ricki stood before him, shaking all over. Slowly, she lowered the crucifix, but only because her muscles were trembling too much to continue holding them up.

"Ricki, I'm not a vampire. I'm a normal, warm-blooded human like you are. Just with some unique features."

"Unique features," she repeated incredulously.

"Yes. Perennials are unkillable. Plus, we don't feel the effects of aging or get sick. Not even a common cold. We can't catch or pass on any diseases, and we're sterile. No babies."

"No diseases and no babies? Then why'd you wear a condom?"

"Well, uh, because it's bad manners not to." Visibly uncomfortable, he cleared his throat. "The other major difference is that we don't leave a strong imprint."

"What the hell does that mean?"

"Meaning we don't stick in people's minds," he explained. "The rule is, if I don't have regular contact with a mortal for a month, the mortal will forget me."

She flinched with recognition. *You will forget me in a month.*

"I become that foggy memory everyone's felt at some

time or another. You ever repeat a story you heard somewhere, and can’t remember who told you? That was a Perennial. You ever have a déjà vu feeling, a flash memory

of a person you kinda recall but not really? Perennial. Ever look at old photos of yourself, group shots, and see someone you can't place? Perennial."

"Why do I remember you, then? Why does Tuesday remember you, and Ms. Della?"

"Because I see y'all all the time! A month has to pass before I'm forgotten."

"Mmm," she said, folding her arms against her chest. "I regret to inform you, Ezra, but there's no such thing as Perennials. Outside of flowers like peonies, daylilies, and lavender."

"That fella at the flea market last night? The one who said we were doomed. He was a Perennial. And he said we were a terrible idea because Perennial-mortal relationships are impossible to sustain."

"Sure, everyone knows that," Ricki said, her voice dripping with sarcasm. "Tell me, Ezra, how did he know what you were?"

"Perennials can always see other Perennials. To each other, we look unfocused, hazy. Like watching a 3D movie without 3D glasses, a technology I'm still not convinced elevates the movie experience, by the way." He paused for a beat. "Let me ask you something. Do you remember who I sent to buy your portrait?"

"Of course I do. It was…" Frowning, Ricki realized she actually had no idea. She strained her brain, trying to remember.

"I… well, I just…"

"You recall the person who gave you my
phone number?" "Well, off the top of my head,
I don't really…"

"You remember a name? What were they wearing? Any
details at all?"

This can't be happening, she thought, mind racing,
heart thumping.

None of this is real.

"She was my counselor, Dr. Arroyo-Abril. She posed as my assistant as a favor. She's a Perennial, too. And she's vanishing from your mind."

Ricki was speechless. Honestly, she couldn't recall this woman. There was a vague memory of… something? Her tuberose scent. The sound of her boots—maybe Uggs?—crunching in the snow. But the details were a pixelated blur in the way back of her mind.

"Why did you send her to buy my portrait?"

"Because it was of you. I had to have it." He paused, looking away. "I'd

been dreaming of your face for an eternity."

And then Ezra begged her to listen to the rest of the story. Ricki relented. "You have two minutes, tops."

So he started talking.

He told her that at first, he didn't believe the curse was real. Who would've?

Racked with guilt over Felice's death, he knew he had to get out of New York City. Fallon County was out of the question, and the only other place he'd lived was France. So he shipped off to Paris—and tried to die. He wanted to test his mortality. One blisteringly hot evening, he drank himself blind and flung himself into the Seine. But he came to hours later, fished out of the river. Alive and without a scratch. In the alley behind a Left Bank café, he tried to set himself on fire with a lighter. But the flames never caught. Finally, he hired a hit man to kill him when he didn't expect it. When the hulking gunman showed up at his apartment with a pistol, the guy froze and then refused to shoot.

"I know why you're doing this, but it won't work," said the gunman in French. "You're a Perennial. So am I. Scary at first, but you'll get used to it. C'est la vie!"

The friendly immortal gunman handed him a business card, shook his hand, and disappeared.

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And thus, he found Dr. Arroyo-Abril. Through the doctor—a longtime immortal, herself—Ezra discovered the vast international network of non- aging folks like him. His

diagnosis was immortality, but the proper term for his kind was Perennial. Ezra was a *Perennial*. Now he was forever twenty-

eight years old and carrying more memories and history than any human was meant to. A young man with an old heart, stumbling to catch up with the world, wondering which he should cling to: the past or the present.

Ezra was a clock ticking in an airless, windowless room. He wandered around Paris, inescapably lonely and unable to shake his cosmic purposelessness, until February 1, 1932. It was four years later, the next leap year after his curse. A time when the veil between the physical world and spiritual world grew gossamer thin. His purpose became clear.

On February 1, her face appeared in his dreams. Her, the true love Felice had cursed him with. That day and all February long, he was haunted by her face, as well as disparate, discombobulating musical notes: pieces of a song that he couldn't make work. He felt a tingling in his chest, a restless tugging, a yearning for memories he hadn't made yet.

That was the first time Ezra was pulled back to Harlem involuntarily. Before he knew it, he was back in his brownstone. And all month, he roamed the streets, looking for this woman, driven by a grasping longing for his true love, who, if Felice's curse was to be believed, would die soon after he found her. But on the first day of March, the longing subsided, the visions stalled, and Ezra felt free to leave. And he did, traveling wherever there was music. Saint Louis. Abeokuta. Chicago. London. Trenchtown.

Then, four years later, on February 1 of the next leap year, it all started again. He was visited by her face and the weird snippets of music in his dreams. And once again, he was pulled back to his Harlem brownstone for the month. And it went on and on like this, every February of every leap year, with Ezra spending the first to the twenty-ninth searching Harlem for his Big Love.

When will we meet? he used to wonder. *1944? 1976? 2112? 3068?* Not knowing was its own misery. Ezra couldn't do anything but wait for the day their timelines collided. And then he would have to send her far away from him. He'd prevent another tragedy.

Ezra had pictured her face in his mind for damn near a century but had never seen her in real life. Until he spotted her in the community garden where Eden Lounge used to stand.

“I was terrified,” he admitted in his slow, deep drawl. “It felt like a beginning and an ending. After decades of preparing to meet you, I… wasn’t prepared. Because I knew I’d fall in love, and I knew I’d have to

convince you to leave. And deep down, I knew you wouldn't." He cast his gaze downward. "I've had too much loss in my life. I can't bear this."

Ricki considered the way Ezra delivered these comments with absolute frankness. It made him sound even crazier. She backed away from him slowly, into the kitchen, until her ass hit the counter.

"You're saying that you're not twenty-eight. You're actually an old man."

"Well, I'm twenty-eight, but I've been twenty-eight since 1928. So technically, I'm a hundred twenty-four." And then he attempted levity. "I'm not old; I'm chronologically premium."

Ricki glared at him with blazing fury. Ezra gulped, realizing that this was no time for jokes.

"I've practiced explaining this to you in a thousand different ways," he went on, his eyes pleading. "But every way sounds insane. I know."

"I don't think you do." She tried to still the tremble in her voice. "Let's recap, shall we? You were a famous jazz pianist during the Renaissance. You were living it up until you played at a rent party in my shop. At which point your girlfriend hexed you and jumped off the roof."

"The roof of *this* building," he noted. "It bears repeating."

"And, allegedly, this is your piano." She stormed over to it and slammed her hand down on the top. An obliterating force leveled her, sending warm tingles through her body.

Ezra watched her, his gaze possessive.

"It's mine," he said quietly. "Probably why it makes you feel like that." Ricki snatched her hand away, like she'd just touched an open flame. "Sure. And every leap year February you're drawn to Harlem to find your soulmate. And I'm really expected to believe that's me."

Planting his hands behind him on the floor, Ezra leaned back a little.

Gravely, his eyes searched her face.

"I don't know, Ricki…," he started. "Do you believe you're my soulmate?"

And then, for a moment, as their gazes collided, sense-memory scenes of the night before hit her like a sudden punch. His mouth, his tongue, his hands, the hungry desperation of his growl as he sank into her the first time. Her connection to Ezra Walker felt earth-shattering.

God, Ricki was so weak for him. Still. Even knowing that he was out of

his mind.

Keep it together, she thought, taking a restorative inhale. *Don't falter.*

"And Felice?" she went on, in an unsteady voice. "Her family? Her people?"

"Her mother was sent her belongings: her clothes, shoes, and the pearl bracelet. Maybe her things are still in the family. Her death didn't even make the papers; I doubt it'd even appear in civic records."

"Convenient. Well, don't think I won't do my research," she threatened. "Ricki, I know it sounds like malarkey. But why would I invent all this?"

"Shrooms? Peyote? Multiple personality disorder? I've dated guys who've had experience with all three. I know the symptoms."

"Listen to me," said Ezra, getting up off the floor. This time, Ricki let him, but she still backed away into the kitchen, maintaining a safe distance. "We're fated. It's why we kept running into each other. It wasn't a coincidence. We were destined to fall for each other."

Ricki went still, her breath catching in her throat. If they were, in fact, fated lovers (she knew it couldn't possibly be, but *if*), then the rest of Felice's curse would be true, too. A grave realization settled over her, and it felt far heavier than every other detail in Ezra's story.

"If we're soulmates," she breathed, "then I'm also destined to die on February 29."

Ezra's whole body seemed to wilt. "I tried to save you, Ricki. I told you to leave Harlem. I tried to avoid you, before we got in too deep. But here we are. And it's too late."

"Because we're twelve days out from February 29."

He nodded, miserable. "And it's all my fault. I did this to you. And I can't bear the thought of losing you."

Ricki shook her head back and forth, trying to clear her mind. "Sorry, no. No. None of this makes sense. Ezra, you're clearly having some sort of mental break or… or… a hallucination or something." She delivered this gently, the

way you'd speak to a hysterical child. "I don't believe in magic, dark or otherwise."

"You got eucalyptus hanging in your shower to enhance emotional clarity."

"*It's an aesthetic,*" she declared. "And don't look at me like that!"

She made an impatient sound and buried her face in her hands. Ricki felt destroyed, toyed with. She felt like a cosmic joke. That she was able to fall so hard, to feel so protected and sacred in his arms, was beyond cruel. Ricki felt more like herself with Ezra than without him. *He* put this wild ache in her. *He* made her crave him; *he* made her fucking fall so hard—but he hadn't given her a place to land. And now she was suspended in midair, a terrible purgatory. Until, of course, her death sentence.

Feeling what she felt for him and having it snatched away was worse than never feeling that connection at all.

Why do I seek out these outrageous, ridiculous situations? I moved six states away to start fresh, but I can't escape my calamitous personality. I'd be me even on the moon.

"Let's say that, by some insane possibility, you're telling the truth," she started evenly. "What have you been doing since 1928? Just wandering the earth aimlessly?"

"More or less."

Ricki threw up her hands. "Specifics!"

"All right," he mumbled. "The first February I came back, four years after the curse, I realized Harlem wasn't the same place. It was 1932. Prohibition ended but so had the Renaissance; the Depression decimated Harlem. And no one remembered me. Not Lo, not my band. It was like my old world had pushed me out the door, turning the lock behind me. So I stayed in my house every fourth February, but the rest of the time, I rented it out and traveled the world. Went where the music was.

"I was too blocked to play my own stuff, so I became a… well, an influencer. But not how y'all think of it nowadays. I influenced the artists that mattered. Because I don't leave a strong imprint, I can easily move in and out of studios, jam sessions, gigs. There's always a few questions at first. Who booked him? What'd he say his name was? So on and so forth. But after folks heard me play, the questions were forgotten.

"When you've lived as long as I have, you start to see patterns in the culture. I especially notice patterns in

music. A popular sound stays fresh for about eight, ten years, and then it evolves into another sound. I can feel what's next. I can pinpoint the bridge between eras.

"I've been a silent collaborator on too many hits to remember. I was the whisper in someone's ear, the suggestion in a smoky bar. The applause was

never mine, but it was enough.

“After a session at Chess Records in Chicago, I ran into this kid, Chuck Berry, plucking his guitar out back. Sounded plumb crazy, like nothing I’d ever heard. He said the label wanted him to choose between blues and pop. No surprise—corporate kills creative. Tale as old as time. So I told him to marry blues and pop and spike it with country licks on a backbeat piano. I showed him what I meant on the studio piano, and he fucking lost it. Oh. Sorry, I…”

“Ezra Walker, don’t you dare pull that chivalry shit right now. Keep talking.”

“Right. Anyway, the blues, pop, country equation felt like him. It felt like the future. In his memoir, Chuck said I put the roll in rock. But he couldn’t remember my name.

“Look in the liner notes of *The Great Ray Charles*, his 1957 album. He dedicates two songs to 'some Harlem cat’ who showed him how to 'use his left hand like a drum.’ Quincy Jones heard me play a few chords in the late ’60s; I wanna say it was at the Lighthouse in LA? Later, he reimagined the melody when he produced Michael Jackson’s 'Human Nature.’ He says so in his documentary. Didn’t include my name, of course. He couldn’t remember it.

“At a Motown studio session in 1970-something, I whispered a few ideas in Stevie Wonder’s head. Some chords, a few melodies. They ended up on what music theorists think is his most experimental album.” He rubbed the back of his neck, seeming to hesitate.

As blatantly improbable as this story was, Ezra was such a convincing storyteller that Ricki was sucked in. She couldn’t help herself. “Wh-what’s the album called?”

“Stevie Wonder’s Journey Through the Secret Life of Plants.” He looked down at his hands, speaking quietly. “I know, it’s got you written all over it.”

Ricki’s jaw dropped, an icy chill rolling down her back. Feeling dizzy, she grabbed on to the counter for support. It couldn’t be. She’d never even mentioned to him that she played that album every day of her life.

“Chaka Khan’s 'Ain’t Nobody’? The fire-red moon in Jimi

Hendrix’s 'Voodoo Chile’? The title itself? Me. In ’67 I was gigging at Atlantic Studios, and I overheard Aretha rehearsing Otis Redding’s track 'Respect.’

Her band was calling her by this nickname, Re-Re. I thought it would differentiate her version from Otis's if she sang '*Re-re-re-respect*' on the chorus." Ezra glanced at Ricki. "Worked, you could say."

Ricki couldn't speak. All she could think of was Tuesday sharing the Chaka Khan anecdote at the Sweet Colette party. And hearing the Jimi Hendrix story in the documentary at Ms. Della's house.

God help me, she thought. *I'm going crazy. Just like him.*

"I've been around for decades, Ricki, slipping in and out of memory, places, lives, and music. It's been a lifetime of loss. Everyone I've ever cared about is gone. And it never gets easier," he said, his expression strained. "It's nasty work, tricking folks into thinking you're normal… for a week, two weeks. Because you start to believe it, too. Then you wake up and realize you're standing in a life half-lived. Just going through the motions in the dark."

As Ezra walked over to her, Ricki took a long breath. He was softening her edges. Her heart was at war with her brain; all she wanted was to run into his arms, but then she'd be just as crazy as he was. Ricki stood still, backed against the kitchen counter, as he closed the distance between them. This time, she didn't push him away or scream or threaten him with heat tools. Grasping her shoulders, he spoke with a helpless melancholy.

"I've seen beautiful things and terrible things. Until you, I didn't know that they're two sides of the same feeling. I want you, Ricki. Actually, it's not a want. It's an uncompromising, inconvenient *need*. But it'll ruin us both."

Her eyes welled up with tears, hot and sharp. She dug deep inside herself to find the strength to not fall for this. To not get sucked into some dude's madness, like all the times before. Her father's admonishment, *You let things happen to you*, was imprinted on her brain. But she'd changed.

Ricki would dictate the terms of her own story. No one else.

"You need to leave, Ezra," she said, tears flowing. "Do yourself a favor and seek some psychiatric care. Get help. I

believe you’re a good person. But I can’t ever see you again.”

Ezra understood the conversation was over. He grabbed his jeans and shoes and then realized he was bare-chested.

“Um. Can I have my… Would you mind…” He gestured vaguely at her wearing his shirt.

“GET OUT.”

“Right.” He nodded. “Yeah, of course, you keep it. I’m gone.” He was out the door in under sixty seconds.

After he left, Ricki stood frozen in place for what felt like an eternity. At some point, she crawled into the bed and curled in on herself, tucking her knees into Ezra’s shirt. His warm, clean scent enveloped her like the sweetest embrace. And then she cried herself to sleep.

Much later, Ricki woke to frantic knocking on her back door. She stumbled from her bed and caught a glimpse of herself in the wall mirror. Not good. Mascara-tear streaks, tangled bedhead, pillow-creased cheeks. A hickey was blossoming just under her jaw, and her lips were still raw from kissing. She was not presentable. But the person at the door was banging with such force, there was no way to ignore it.

“I’m coming.” Ricki yanked on joggers and checked the peephole. It was Tuesday, with a crazed look in her eyes. She burst into the studio.

“Thank God you’re alive.” She swept Ricki into her arms ferociously. Then she stormed around the apartment, opening the shower, checking the closet, peering under the bed. Her energy was bonkers.

“Where is he? Where is that motherfucker?” she bellowed. “I’ll kill him!”

Chasing after her, Ricki said, “Ezra? He’s gone; he left hours ago.” Tuesday paused in front of Ricki, in the middle of her tiny hallway,

breathing hard. “I’ve been trying to reach you since yesterday. Where have you been?”

“My phone’s in my purse.” She slumped against the wall, sliding to the floor. Tuesday sat next to her. “It was the best twenty-four hours I’ve ever spent with a man. And it all just imploded with the galactic force of a dying star.”

“A dying star, huh?”

“I’ll never speak to him again.” Ricki dropped her cheek

to Tuesday's shoulder, drained. "He's batshit. Seriously. This man believes that he's immortal."

Tuesday blinked. "Girl, *what*?" "Forget it. What's wrong?"

“You know I know how to spot a shady man,” said Tuesday. “I knew Ezra was hiding something. So I broke into his house yesterday.”

With a groan, Ricki drew up her knees and buried her face between them. “Tuesday, I’m hanging on to my sanity by a very thin thread. Please tell me you didn’t commit a felony.”

“I absolutely did,” she admitted, unashamed. “First of all, I was sitting at home with writer’s block and needed an activity to distract me. And second, what I’m *not* about to do is allow some slick stalker to savagely murder my bestie. Or worse.”

Ricki raised her head. “What’s worse than that?”

“The point is, if I had someone looking out for me in Hollywood, I might not have ended up in horrible situations with horrible men. You’re lucky you have me.”

“But Tuesday…”

“And just as I suspected, Ezra Walker is weird. And so is his house. He’s got a renter on the bottom, in this normal, if uninspired, apartment. He lives on the upstairs floors… but it’s all empty. Except, there’s this one creepy- as-fuck room crammed with all this old-timey furniture and technology.” She dropped her voice to a whisper. “Do you know what a liminal space is?”

“Yeah, it’s a space that serves as a conduit from one place to another. Tunnels, doorways, stairwells, bridges, airport terminals. Transitional spaces.”

“Exactly. Well, this room felt like a liminal space in *time*. The stuff in the room? It wasn’t artifacts from one particular era; it was a century’s worth. It felt like I’d stepped outside the time-space continuum. And that,” she announced grandly, “is where I found these.”

Tuesday pulled out her phone and showed Ricki photos of the sheet music.

“Music. Sheets and sheets of music, all with these crazy, impossible dates. So random.”

“Not random,” whispered Ricki, with growing horror. “They’re leap years.”

“Look at the oldest sheets. They’re fragile, like if you

breathe on them, they'll disintegrate. Where did he get this ancient paper? And read his commentary in the margins. He says that the notes don't add up, that he

can’t make a complete song out of them. Then, on February 1 of this year, the day you saw him in the garden—he says it started to come together.

“I’ve solved the mystery,” continued Tuesday, staring Ricki directly in the eye. “Ezra Walker is a psychopath antique collector and possible time traveler. Now, we just need to find out what he wants with you.”

Ricki lolled her head back against the wall.

“Oh, Tuesday,” she said softly, “I think I already know.”

CHAPTER 17

BW + FF

February 18, 2024

WIKIPEDIA

Breeze Walker (January 3, 1900–unknown) was an American stride jazz pianist and composer. Popular during his Harlem Renaissance heyday, he recorded several hit songs from 1924–1928, but the music hasn't survived and Walker is largely forgotten today. In 1927, he was hired to lead the house band, The Friday Knights, at famed Harlem cabaret Eden Lounge. Sometime in early 1928, Breeze Walker vanished and was never seen again. His disappearance remains unsolved.

In 1929, an electrical fire burned Eden Lounge to the ground— and with it, the only known recordings of Walker's songs, all of which had been stored in the basement, including "Happy Sad," "Hotcha Gotcha," and "Midnight Jasmine." There were no fatalities, but historians cite Eden Lounge's demise as the symbolic end of the Jazz Age.

Walker is believed to be from South Carolina, but no historical records exist.

Ricki hadn’t left her apartment—or opened Wilde Things—since coming home with Ezra the night before last. She was spiraling just a smidge. She’d started to think the piano was watching her, and so whenever she needed to cross the room, she walked in an exaggeratedly broad circle around it. She curled up with her laptop on the shag rug where she and Ezra had slept, and obsessively googled every piece of his tall tale, from his anecdotes with famous musicians to details about Eden Lounge. She watched interviews, read liner notes, and bought multiple ebooks by music historians (there was no time to wait for physical books to be snail-mailed). She’d devoted an entire wall to multicolored Post-its tracking key details, like a TV detective. And she refused to take off Ezra’s shirt.

Ricki was going nuts.

What was she supposed to do? Everything Ezra told her was completely unbelievable: a fever dream of a story. He was creative; she’d give him that. But utterly crazy.

At least, she kept telling herself that. The more she analyzed everything he’d said, the less insane it seemed. Ricki had to admit that if she’d been hearing this story as an uninvolved third party—like, if she’d been following it on a podcast or a documentary series—she might have believed it.

Ricki wasn’t *not* open to metaphysical stuff or the idea that there was more to the universe than what she could see. Her favorite books were Eva Mercy’s *Cursed* series, about a witch and a vampire in endless love (the author’s signing later that week was the only thing keeping her going at this point). She sort of believed in the power of crystals, specifically amethysts to bring luck in business and pyrite to combat imposter syndrome—the only part of the Ali experience that had any value. She crossed the street when she saw a black cat. She was in touch with her internal witchiness enough to at least consider the possibility that burning sage cleared negative energy. Did Ricki name her plants? Yes. Did she talk to them? Also yes. Did she think that maybe, somewhere deep inside their stamens, they could perceive her voice in some way?

Absolutely. After all, she was convinced that peace lilies couldn’t grow without Stevie Wonder.

Her eyes fluttered closed. Ezra had supposedly worked on that Stevie Wonder album.

To believe in *some* magic is to believe in *all*. You couldn’t be terrified of

demons without believing in angels, too. If you believe your good Yelp reviews, you've got to deal with the shitty ones, too.

Ninety percent of her believed Ezra's story was impossible. It was the other ten percent that had kept her up all night.

Night-blooming jasmine flourishing in winter was impossible, too. And yet they'd both smelled it in the community garden. And what about the inarguable erotic power of that goddamn piano? And Ezra's sheet music throughout time? And what about the song he played for her—*with* her, *through* her, *in* her—was that the one he'd been piecing together for a century, finally come together?

Either this was the most complicated con of all time, or it was true. There was no in-between. And if it was a con, what for? Her parents were wealthy, but she was barely scraping by. There was too much unexplainable shit happening, too many connections tying them together. Even now, being away from him, she felt an inexplicable tug she couldn't do a single fucking thing about.

With every man before Ezra, Ricki realized that she was playing a role. With one guy, she was a seducer. With someone else, an innocent. Within five minutes of meeting a man, she knew who and what he wanted, and she'd mold herself into their dream girl. She rarely gave men her true opinion; she usually acquiesced to their harebrained schemes, and the worst part was she actually thought she was being savvy by preventing men from really knowing her. Who could hurt her if she was unknowable?

But now Ricki realized that was a lie. She'd wanted to be easy to be around, because deep down, she believed that her true self was *too much*. The Wildes had certainly reinforced this idea her whole life. Ricki was always too much. Unlovable.

With Ezra, she hadn't had a chance to be anything other than herself. He never gave her the option. Every encounter felt so big and all-consuming that she never found her footing enough to put on an act. He was a mystery; she had no clue what he wanted. So Ricki was

Ricki.

And he really seemed to enjoy her. He delighted in the things about her that her family made her feel were absurd. Nothing seemed to surprise this man, which, if his story was true, would make sense. What would shock a 124-year-old guy?

But how could it be true?

She lay on her bed, the clock ticking closer and closer to her scheduled tea with her de facto grandmother. Ms. Della—a woman who minded everyone else's business without a degree of subtlety—knew she'd gone on the date Friday and was going to ask about Ezra. What the hell would she tell her? The truth? No chance. Ms. Della was the most stridently practical person she'd ever known. She wasn't about to have her new grandma out here thinking she'd gone nuts.

Even though all signs did in fact point to "nuts." Ricki was too scared to leave her apartment, because she knew she'd run into Ezra. And yet the house freaked her out now, too! She considered the details she'd taken for granted and never thought to investigate.

There's a boarded-up ground-floor apartment that's been empty since the 1920s, Ms. Della had said when they first met. *Wouldn't it make a pretty flower shop?*

Ezra had told her that Felice's suicide never made the papers. She trolled the internet for info anyway. But there was no mention of the building, a scandal, or even a rent party anywhere online.

Just then, Ricki bolted upright in bed with a gasp. Her cloudy thoughts cleared. If what Ezra said happened in the early morning hours of February 29, 1928, was true, Ms. Della might know the story. Weren't property owners and management companies legally obligated to release the history of a building before selling it?

Ricki tore off Ezra's shirt, replaced it with a Georgia State sweatshirt, threw on holey jeans, and ran upstairs, holding her breath the whole way.

"Ricki Wilde, you look like you've seen a ghost! And your cheeks are on fire. Do you have a fever? And why are you so early? Lord knows this is a first."

Ms. Della placed the back of her hand on Ricki's forehead. Then, with a disapproving tsk, she hooked her wispy arm through Ricki's and led her into the living room, depositing her on the chaise lounge. Ricki sat there, trying

to catch her breath and attempting to not look as stressed as she felt. Ms. Della handed Ricki a toasty-warm cup of tea and then sat across from her on her favorite plush wing chair.

“You ought to take better care of yourself, dear,” said Ms. Della,

straightening the shoulders of her emerald caftan. “All you do is work at your shop. Do you even sleep?”

“I’m fine, Ms. Della. Don’t worry. Um, I… uh… wanted to talk to you…”

“Oh, I know why you look so dazed,” she interrupted, her eyes crinkling with wickedness. She slipped her glasses atop her vivid fuchsia ’fro and leaned forward eagerly and shakily. “How was your big date with Ezra?”

“It was great. But I…”

“Good for you!” She winked. “You deserve it. I hope you don’t mind my saying so, but Ali wasn’t right for you. He didn’t look like he was adept at… horizontal refreshments, as it were.” She cocked a brow knowingly. “I saw him dance at your art night, dear. No movement from the waist down. Like one of those floppy, inflatable gas station tube figures.”

“Ms. Della…”

“When you two came up for brunch, he ate a cream doughnut *with utensils*. That’s not a man gifted in the sensual arts.”

“Ms. Della, I need to talk to you. It’s about… Well, it’s going to sound strange. But just go with it, okay?”

“Mmm, sounds serious.” She placed her teacup back on its saucer, and Ricki noticed the IV taped down in the crook of her left elbow. Alarmed, she did a double take. But before she could ask what had happened, she was interrupted by a peppy young nurse wearing Figs scrubs and an arm tattoo of Lana Del Rey’s face. She bounded into the room, clutching her hands together in a gesture of polite, cheerful service.

“How are we doing, Ms. Della? Time to take some blood!”

“Can you give me just a few, Naaz? This is Ricki, my granddaughter.
She has something important to discuss with me.”

Even with all the madness swirling around her, Ricki felt a surge of warmth at Ms. Della publicly claiming her as her granddaughter. It was like snuggling under a weighted blanket.

“Hi, Naaz, it’s nice to meet you,” said Ricki, shaking her

hand. Who was this person, and why did Ms. Della need a nurse?

"Oh, hi. Ms. Della's file says she has no descendants." "She's chosen family, dear," explained Ms. Della.

"Framily," said Naaz. "A friend that's family. I host Framily Friendsgiving, actually. Last year, I cooked the frozen turkey from Popeyes'

holiday menu. It's pre-seasoned!" Naaz winked and exited the room.

"Who is that?" whispered Ricki, wasting no time getting to the bottom of this.

"Her? Oh, she's just my new in-home aide. Turns out, getting older is not so fun. I have a benign cyst. It's nothing, but she'll be staying with me for a bit, just for monitoring. She's quite… peppy. Before she was a nurse, she was something called a 'party motivator,' getting people to dance at bar mitzvahs and weddings. Did you know that was a job?"

Ricki had never heard Ms. Della speak so fast. Ms. Della made this new development sound casual, but it definitely didn't seem casual.

"Dear, close your mouth," she continued. "You'll catch flies." "But… a home aide? Not like hospice, right?"

"No," she scoffed, chuckling softly. The chuckle turned into a hearty cough. "I just dislike hospitals. Receiving care in the comfort of your own home? Underrated luxury."

Ricki tried to play along, but she knew in her heart that Ms. Della was lying. She was ninety-six years old! Being sick at this age was most likely fatal. But Ricki also knew she wouldn't reveal the truth before she was ready.

I can't lose her, she thought, staving off preemptive sorrow. *She's my rock. And we haven't had enough time together.*

It was a crushing, creeping fear, this idea of losing this woman she loved. They'd had each other in their lives for less than a year. It wasn't fair. Ricki respected Ms. Della far too much to push her on the topic. When Ms. Della was finished with a conversation, she was done. But now, in the face of an obvious health crisis, Ricki felt ridiculous introducing the unsolvable mystery of Ezra Walker. Especially since if it was true, there was a distinct possibility that she might die.

Growing up in funeral homes, Ricki was exposed to death and dying at an early age. She was well versed in

wakes, dead bodies, and last rites. She'd hang out with the morticians and makeup artists, hearing stories of corpses reflexively surging upright or changing complexions mid-makeover. Death was spoken about so frankly—as if it were no more than the period at the end of everyone's sentence—but it never felt banal to her. It felt like something to dread, to rail against. Whenever she'd attended a

funeral for work, she couldn't stop thinking about the people left behind. The despair on a weeping husband's face. The middle-aged people who, after losing a parent, were lost, abandoned orphans. The little ones who were too young to intellectualize that their beloved grandma or grandpa would never return from wherever they'd gone.

Ricki couldn't give in to the inevitability of death. Instead, it made her want to live harder than anyone else, go deeper, feel everything, grow things, and approach the world with sharpened senses.

And despite all the anonymous death around her, no one close to her had ever died. Her great-grands and grands had all passed before she was born. She still had both her parents, and her sisters. Ricki wasn't prepared to experience personal loss.

Stop overreacting, she told herself, trying to stave off her slowly mounting panic. *Yes, the woman is elderly, but she's in great health. You had your own benign ovarian cyst scare in 2013. You had a laparoscopy and lived to see another day!*

The idea that Ricki might be facing down her own death sentence passed through her mind again. *No.* She rebuked the thought. It was a hill too steep to climb. She'd confront it only after she'd confirmed that Ezra was, indeed, telling the truth. Until then, she'd compartmentalize.

Ms. Della tapped her flame-red nails on her teacup, snapping Ricki back to reality. "You're acting real funny today. What's on your mind, dear?"

Ricki stared out of the window at the street, trying to figure out where to start. "I've been curious about this house."

"Curious how?"

"The history of it. You told me that it was boarded up in 1928 and stayed abandoned until you bought it a few years ago, right?"

"It's true. I had my eye on it for a while. It was a great day when I finally convinced the good doctor to buy it."

She coughed again, into her elbow, and then patted her chest. Ricki tried not to flinch.

“Do you know anything about this building’s past? Like, why was it boarded up? I googled it, but no information came up.”

Ms. Della nodded slowly. “That’s because no information would. Tragedy struck that year. February 29, 1928. It was a leap year, like this one.”

Ricki's stomach dropped. No, it plummeted, roller-coaster style. "What happened that night?"

The elderly woman squirmed in her seat. "Why are you asking now?" "Oh, no reason," she said with a wan smile, trying to seem light. "Old Harlem history is my new obsession. You know I've been doing those flower Instagram posts around the neighborhood."

"All I know was a young showgirl from Louisiana committed suicide at a party that night," Ms. Della revealed, her voice hoarse and weakened from coughing. "Threw herself off the roof, for some reason. Her death was a mystery, really. Because she was an unknown Black girl, of course. But also because the owners of the building buried the news. See, there were these German brothers, the Schumachers, I believe their name was, who owned most of this block. They didn't want the story reported, because who'd want to rent an apartment in a brownstone where a girl leapt to her death? But they couldn't find renters, anyway. Because people talk, you know.

"So the Schumachers could never fill the vacancy. And the property just sat here, changing hands. I like to think it was waiting for me. And you." She smiled warmly.

Ricki had gone numb. For want of something to do, she grabbed the Wedgwood cup and drank her peppermint tea down straight. She was hoping the warmth would smother her nerves and quiet the screams in her brain. It didn't.

Okay, so it happened, she thought. *It happened, but Ezra could still be lying about his involvement. But what would be his motive?*

"Can I ask you something?" Ricki ventured slowly. "If the brownstone had a weird reputation, why did you want to live here? You say your eye had been on it for a while, but you lived your entire married life in Atlanta. How did you know this address existed?"

Naaz, who had an enviable knack for timing and an irrepressible love of gossip, burst back into the dining room, holding a syringe and gauze.

"Ten more minutes, please, Naaz," said Ms. Della, not

breaking eye contact with Ricki.

“All good.” She winked jovially and walked out, backward, without skipping a beat.

“That girl’s fixing to give me a heart attack,” muttered the older woman. She sat back in her chair and shut her paper-thin almond-brown lids. After

taking a couple of labored breaths, she then opened them again.

"Ms. Della, you seem tired," said Ricki. "Just tell me if you want to stop talking."

"Don't be silly. I don't know why we never spoke about this before. I reckon I'm just private. Most folks are about as trustworthy as a crooked senator at a rigged chili cook-off."

Ricki couldn't help but smile. Ezra spoke like that sometimes.

Oh God, thought Ricki. *If the curse is true, Ezra is generations older than even Ms. Della!*

"Anyway," continued Ms. Della, "I always knew about this building. Since I was small…" Ms. Della's face grew unreadable. "The showgirl, Felice Fabienne? She was my mother."

Ricki dropped the empty teacup on her lap, and it toppled to the rug below. She didn't move to retrieve it. She didn't move at all, in fact.

With sharpened eyebrows, Ms. Della watched Ricki watch the cup fall. Only then, under her disapproving gaze, did Ricki snap out of her trance, picking it up.

"I never knew my mother," Ms. Della told her. After a lengthy cough, she continued. Her voice sounded even raspier. "Well, I don't remember her, I should say. I was born in 1927 and she died in '28, when I was just a baby. My nana raised me in Louisiana, where I lived until I met Dr. Bennett at a church social. He was a handsome young Morehouse student visiting relatives. I married him two days after my high school graduation, moved to Atlanta, and never looked back." She smiled. "Anyway, story has it, Felice moved to Harlem to be a star. I've heard she had a flair for the dramatic; it's no wonder she named me Adelaide. A mouthful, isn't it? I've always been called Della."

Adelaide. Ricki sank into her chair. God help her, it was true, then. It was true.

"Have you heard of Eden Lounge? It was a short-lived contemporary of the Cotton Club. She danced there. Do you

know how *prestigious* it was to land that job during the Renaissance? It's funny—even despite everything, I'm proud of her. Nana told me that when she saved enough money, Felice's plan was to send for me. But that day never came." Ms. Della said this flatly, her teacup clinking against the saucer. "I suppose I've always been sort of… angry with her. You can't help but hold it against a person, you

know. I can't imagine being a mother and leaving my child behind." She sighed, her cloudy eyes staring down at her cup. "She's a hole that's never been filled in my life. So I'd always vowed to buy this building one day. Maybe get some answers. Feel closer to her. Stop feeling blue about her.

"New York is a moody town. I've learned this since living here. It requires a certain armor, a resilience that must come naturally. Felice might not've had it. Look like to me she had a touch of the up-and-downs, or what people today would call mood swings or bipolar or something like that. Borderline personality disorder? I'm no doctor, obviously, but you learn a few things after being married to one for over seventy years." Her expression was far off, thoughtful. "The apple doesn't fall far, I reckon. I've suffered the blues my whole life, but medication evens me out. My mother was born too early to get the right treatment. Or any treatment at all."

Ms. Della paused and glanced out of her window. "This is speculation, of course. I really don't know that much about her. Nana barely spoke her name. It must've been painful, losing a child that way. All I know is that Felice was a dancer and Nana's only daughter." And then, as an aside, she added, "I also know she could dress. Style to beat the *band*."

Without warning, Ms. Della took a strong breath, hoisted herself up out of the chair, and disappeared into her bedroom. "Be right back," she called over her shoulder.

Using her last functioning brain cell, Ricki desperately tried to talk herself off a ledge. *This can all be explained. Ezra must've heard Felice's story somehow. There has to be an oral history of Old Harlem that didn't make it to newspapers or biographies. If you speak to the right elders, you can find out anything. It's like that in Atlanta, too. It's like that wherever Black people are—we carry hidden histories, passed down from generation to generation. Maybe Ezra really is just a weirdo antique furniture collector, like Tuesday said, and he got a little too wrapped up in a Harlem Renaissance obsession, injecting himself into a juicy story he'd once heard.*

After all, Ms. Della hadn’t mentioned Breeze Walker even once.

When Ms. Della came back, she was wearing a four-strand pearl bracelet. It was nicked and dull but still beautiful.

“This was Felice’s,” she said. “Glamorous, isn’t it? I once read that showgirls were so desired, they’d receive all sorts of opulent gifts from admirers after shows. The clasp is inscribed, see? BW + FF. I’ve always

wondered who BW could be. Now, I bet *that's* a story."

Ricki didn't hear the last sentence, because she'd fainted dead away.

CHAPTER 18

LITTLE SPOONED

February 19, 2024

Ricki awoke with a start at 4:00 a.m., bathed in sweat, convinced the last couple of days had been a dream. Quickly, her impossible reality set in. And she did the only thing she could think of.

In the chilly dark of the winter morning, Ricki padded across the apartment to Wilde Things and whipped up a bespoke arrangement of amaryllis, primrose, and Chinese evergreen. Before sunrise, she dropped it off at 146 West 133rd Street, laying it down gently in front of a nondescript residential building that was once the site of the infamous gay speakeasy Harry Hansberry's Clam House. Doing this at a spot owned by Gladys Bentley, pioneering drag king and Black lesbian icon, reminded her that she was just a piece of a larger story. It soothed her soul. Somewhat.

She posted her pic to Instagram, too preoccupied to notice that she had five DMs from two different journalists wanting to interview her. Ricki missed these and the growing number of likes and comments, because her *actual* life was hanging in the balance. But she had a plan to save herself.

Hours later, Ricki lurked inside the doorway of the 125th Street Starbucks, looking infinitely more pulled together

than she felt. Because she (a) found fashion calming and (b) was dramatic, Ricki had dressed carefully for this occasion. She wore an ivory bodysuit, slouchy jeans, and the *pièce de*

résistance, a ’60s cape coat in lipstick red. Yes, it was a lot of look. But she needed to project confidence and to disguise the fact that she was a wreck.

Ricki was nervous but clearheaded. After Naaz the nurse roused her from that fainting spell at Ms. Della’s the day before, she’d floated back to consciousness with a new clarity.

She had to see Ezra. Because she believed him.

Ms. Della had confirmed the story. Ms. Della was *part* of the story. It had to be true. Ricki wasn’t sure what she believed in, in terms of voodoo or folk magic or curses, but there were too many coincidences to ignore.

Hadn’t she been drawn to Harlem, too? The same way Ezra claimed to be pulled back every February of every leap year. What he described—the feeling of being dragged by the heart toward his future—was exactly how she’d felt before moving here.

Ricki was ready to talk. She’d texted, asking him to meet her at Starbucks. It was the perfect location, because it was impossible to romanticize a Starbucks. Ricki couldn’t be anywhere charming or nostalgic with Ezra Walker. Her brain short-circuited around him, and focus was key. Plus, this Starbucks was always packed. If Ezra was, in fact, a nutjob and tried to pull some shit, she’d have witnesses.

And now she’d zeroed in on him across the crowded seating area. There, sitting at a table against the wall, slightly removed from the chaos, was Ezra.

There was no coffee at his table, just him, hands folded patiently, peering out of the window to his left. As usual, he looked casually cool in a knit pullover and charcoal jeans, but exhaustion clouded his handsome features. Dark circles, bloodshot eyes. Like he’d seen hell.

And she noticed something new. He looked… special. Different than everyone else, somehow. In New York, Ricki saw a lot of celebrities in regular places. And no matter how often they hid behind sunglasses or sat in a dark corner of a bar, they commanded attention. You knew that Someone was in the room. Ezra had that quality. Ricki saw people noticing him, their eyes briefly settling on him. No

one knew who he was. But he almost glowed.

Because he used to be Someone, thought Ricki. *Maybe it's a switch you can't turn off.*

Ricki zigzagged her way to Ezra's table and then stood in front of him,

waving energetically, as if she were greeting a distant relative in JFK's arrivals terminal.

"Hello!" she exclaimed with outsized cheeriness, hoping it hid her nervousness.

"Oh! Hi!" Instantly he stood up and reached around the table, pulling out her chair.

Now that she knew how old Ezra really was, the out-of-time politesse, not cursing in front of ladies, pulling out her chair, all the "ma'ams" he doled out, made more sense. He was from a time when Black women were treated delicately. A flash of shame passed through her. Why had she been so alarmed by good manners?

"I came early," said Ezra, taking his seat once Ricki was settled. "I guess… well, I was surprised to hear from you."

"I can imagine," she said evenly, trying to seem normal.

"I, uh, gave you a lot of information the other day," said Ezra, looking as nervous as Ricki felt. There was so much hanging in the air, unsaid and unaddressed.

How do I pretend like this man didn't give me the most transcendent sexual experience of my life? Ricki thought. *How do I act cool when I want to projectile launch myself into his lap?*

Scrambling to find something to say, Ezra blurted out, "I've never been to Starbucks."

"Stop it. Are you one of those extremely discerning coffee connoisseurs?"

"The opposite. I'm not a big coffee guy. Caffeine makes my hands jittery, and I need my fingers." He lowered his voice and leaned his head toward hers. "Is the service always this terrible? I've been sitting here for forty minutes. No one's taken my order."

Ricki stared at him in frozen disbelief before dissolving into giggles. "Ezra! You're supposed to order up front," she said, pointing behind him. "See?"

"Oh?" He peered over his shoulder and then faced Ricki again. "Ohhhh." He shook his head, looking bashful. "I'm so embarrassed."

"Don't be. I weaponized my curling irons; I think we're

even.”

“We’ll never be even,” he said sadly, injecting a jarring bit of reality into the conversation. Neither one of them could pretend that Ezra hadn’t

dragged Ricki into a world of trouble. And a possible death sentence.

Ricki wasn't ready to accept it. The idea of leaving the earth at only twenty-eight, before she'd achieved her destiny, her dreams? Before she'd experienced professional success, a family of her own, her own perfect romance with her own perfect person? She was suddenly so close to grasping it all. Ricki was just beginning to feel like she was standing tall in her new life, making gutsy choices, and winning. And Wilde Things was on the brink of something good—the guerrilla art pieces popping up all over Harlem.

Did any of it even matter if she was going to die? What was it for if she couldn't stick around to enjoy it? What was the point of anything, anything at all, if she couldn't run into Ezra's arms and stay safe there, forever?

"Ricki?" he asked. "Why did you ask me here?"

Ezra's voice jolted her from her spiral. Panicking was pointless. It was time for solutions.

Ricki threw her shoulders back and got to it. "Yesterday, I spoke with the woman who owns my brownstone. She's more than my landlady, really; she's like my grandma. You've seen her with me a few times? She's usually carrying a teacup."

"Oh right, the older woman. She looks like Cicely Tyson?"

"That's her," said Ricki, with a dry swallow. "She's ninety-six years old. From Louisiana, originally. Everyone calls her Ms. Della, but… but her real name is Adelaide."

Ezra's face gave away nothing. Not surprise, alarm, or even vindication. The way he slumped back in his chair was the only sign that he'd registered this information.

"Her mother was Felice Fabienne. She told me the whole story, almost *exactly* the way you told it." She leaned over the table. "She has the pearl bracelet. You didn't tell me it was inscribed. BW + FF. She showed me."

Ezra shut his eyes. His chest rose and fell. And then he buried his face in his hands.

"I googled every detail of your story, Ezra. It's all there."

"It's the truth." He dropped his hands, looking at her. He looked five times more exhausted than he had ten minutes

ago.

“And yet,” countered Ricki, “Google searches can be manipulated.” “Ricki, I have a dial-up modem and still rely on foldout gas station

maps. I can't even navigate Starbucks. How would I manipulate a Google search?"

"Okay, see? This confuses me. If your story's true…"

"It is, Ricki," he insisted, voice choked with pain. "It's true."

"If I *choose* to believe your story. How is it that you live in the world and don't know such basic 2024 things, like GPS?"

"I been around a long time," he explained. "When I was a boy, *elevators* were the wave of the future. *Zippers* were the latest invention. When you've seen it all, you get innovation overload. So you pick and choose what you deal with.

"I like vinyl, so I didn't evolve past record players. Not a fan of Google. If I had my druthers, I'd only research in libraries. But I do enjoy Alexa telling me the weather every morning. Washing machines, AC, photocopiers, and LASIK surgery? A-plus inventions. Tinder, automatic transmission, Roombas, CGI? Dumb." He shrugged. "I'm not that impressed by freezers. They made milkmen obsolete. I miss hearing them deliver those glass bottles at the crack of dawn; it signals a new day has started!" he exclaimed. "Social media? None of my business. Websites frustrate me, mostly. What are these cookies I'm always being asked to accept? TV's probably my favorite twentieth-century development. I always have the newest model, and these days, it's all so good: prestige, reality, sitcoms, cartoons. I mean, have you seen *Succession*? *P-Valley*? And, obviously, I keep up with music. All kinds. Good music's good music; genre's just the bag you carry it in."

Ricki's eyes were anime wide. For want of anything else to say, she sputtered, "I just… But… you say all of this like it's so normal."

"It isn't normal," he conceded. "But it is my life."

She gestured vaguely as she tried to formulate a response, shut her mouth, then tried again. "There's so much I don't get. You really look like a twenty-eight-year-old dude. Like someone I could've known in college. And you're always beautifully dressed, so current. How does a

one- hundred-and-twenty-four-year-old man even *know* about the Virgil Abloh Jordans?”

Grinning, he glanced down at his feet and back at her. “You noticed.”

Ricki noticed everything about him. “I’d think fashion would be one of the things too exhausting to keep up with.”

“Look at Ms. Della.” He paused, remembering that she was Adelaide. Baby Adelaide. He shook his head a bit and reset. “She’s over ninety with pink hair. Style is innate.”

“I have to ask, how do you afford to shop? Travel? Do Perennials even need money?”

“Good question.” Clunkily, he tried to change the subject. “I’m sorry, I didn’t even get a chance to ask you, can I get you some coffee?”

He tried to get up from the table.

“Stop! Don’t you dare move,” ordered Ricki. Then her voice softened. “Please stay. Talk to me. I want to believe you, but I need the whole story. How do you sustain yourself?”

Ezra fidgeted in his seat. Raw melancholy darkened his expression. He’d spent decades not talking about himself to anyone but Dr. Arroyo- Abril. It was a hard habit to break. And how would he start? How does a creaky relic explain his life and times to a woman fortunate enough to be born into a relatively sane world? How could he describe the way living through so many eras, generational resets, and rewrites of social norms set off a low panic in him before he spoke to people, worried that he’d forget what the appropriate customs of the day were? How could he relay his fascination with walking Target or CVS aisles and just… gawking at all the *options*, especially for shit that didn’t exist when he was a kid, like mosquito spray, lint rollers, and ibuprofen? How could he describe the feeling of skipping over time, catapulting over generations, only to end up in the same place every leap year?

He was a battle-scarred time traveler in hiding. And nothing about his life was relatable.

Ricki waited patiently. Generic Starbucks music played in the background, something soft and reggae-adjacent, as the two sat in silence. Finally, Ezra sighed, his shoulders slumping in silent resignation. And he spoke.

“How do I sustain myself? It’s a complicated story, Ricki. I just… come from a different time. Not just in terms of the date, but in terms of life. In the 1910s, Fallon County was Jim Crow in a way that folks today can’t understand. You

see black-and-white photos of unsmiling sharecroppers wearing dusty rags, and it feels like people from another world. We were real people, with real dreams, full identities, talents. It’s probably a gift

from the ancestors that stories of the casual brutality are lost to time.

“We were terrorized. Sometimes it was like you could predict violence by holding your pointer finger up to the wind to track the weather. Other times, you couldn’t. I saw monstrous, inhuman things. I’d rather not go into it.

“My family was killed in a church fire set by the Klan. My cousin Sonny was the only survivor. An overdose killed him in ’31, but he’d been dying for years.” Ezra took a pause, fingering the shirt button at his wrist. “Church terrorism isn’t unique; I mean, it happened all the time, and it still does, doesn’t it?” Ezra let out a hollow, mirthless laugh. He was struggling to continue.

“Anyway, the sheriff ordered this one. Sheriff Rourke was from a moneyed, influential South Carolina family. One of his brothers was the governor; another was a White House wonk. Now, we all knew that this sheriff had Black babies. But white people didn’t. And down there, back then, it would’ve sunk his entire family if it ever came out. They would’ve lost everything. Fortune, political power, everything gone.

“After I became a Perennial, I took a train down to South Carolina. I swore I’d never go back, but everything was different now. I couldn’t die. And it struck me that my grief would be eternal. All the loss from the fire, my family, everyone I grew up knowing in Fallon. It’d just stretch on forever, no relief. So I had business with Sheriff Rourke. And nothing to lose. Less than nothing.” Ezra paused. His voice was flat, devoid of emotion. But his jaw was working. And his voice fell deeper, as if he were physically sinking into the memory.

“I got in his house through a basement window. It was after dark; nobody was up. I caught him by the throat. Pistol to his temple. And I told him I knew his secret. I said I’d keep quiet for fifty thousand dollars. Near a million back then. He gave it to me. It was that easy.

“I gave half the cash to the families of the people who burned in the fire, and Sheriff Rourke’s Black descendants. I invested in the town, building schools, hospitals, roads.

Today, it’s one of the most prosperous Black towns in the South. I’m… I’m right proud of that.” He briefly glanced at her, his eyes mournful. “I invested my half in property. All over the world. Over the years, the money grew and grew. So… that’s it. That’s how I can afford my lifestyle.”

Ezra stopped talking and looked away. He suddenly looked so much older, the weight of all that time and pain etched on his face.

Ricki couldn't bear seeing him this way. Her heart crashed against her ribs. It was devastating, the matter-of-fact practicality with which he told his story. She wanted to cry, to fight, to scream into nothingness. For several lifetimes, he'd been carrying these memories alone—but now he had her.

She wanted to draw him to her chest and comfort him, protect him. To smother him with so much steady, secure affection that he'd forget what it was like to suffer alone. Ricki wanted to be Ezra's support, to be there beside him and help share the weight he was carrying. She wanted to be the one person for whom he could finally let down his walls.

But she couldn't do all of this if she was to die in ten days. And he would still be alone.

Ricki had no more questions. She understood every detail, and they were in it together.

"I believe you," she said resolutely.

"You do?" Ezra looked at her with wonder. "Why?"

"Okay. Well, my mom always keeps her house freezing. She thinks it's good for her skin. When I was little, I always wore this red blanket draped around my shoulders. Everyone thought it was because I was cold, but I was wearing it because it was my magic cloak, and it made all my fantasies come true. I wore it on my grand adventures, making up quests and stomping through the woods behind the house. That cloak and its powers were real to me. I was indestructible when I wore it. I couldn't explain it. But I had faith that it was true. I grew up, but my magical thinking didn't. The world's full of mysteries we can't explain. The Bermuda Triangle. Siberian sinkholes. Malaysia Airlines Flight 370. Twinkies."

Ezra's eyes softened. "Aw, Little Richard. I'm picturing you stomping around in a cape, and it's really cute."

"I told you I do not consent to that nickname!"

"I like your coat, by the way." He gestured at her bright

red vintage cape. “The magic red cloak you had when you were a kid, was that your inspiration?”

Smiling, she offered a slight shrug. “I like symbolism.”

“I see that.” He locked his gaze on hers. Bare-naked affection was all

over Ezra's face. The way he looked at her, with that simmering charisma— he ate her alive. Obliterated all her good sense. Was the charge crackling between them just cosmic fate? Or more? Whatever it was, their connection soothed her darkest fears, made her feel more herself and at home than anywhere, and it was currently turning her to liquid in the middle of Starbucks.

"That night at my apartment," she asked, her voice searching, vulnerable. "Was it real? Or was it just a hex, tricking us into being… like this?"

It gnawed at her, this idea that she was only loved and lovable if a guy was cursed to feel it. Ricki needed to know that it wasn't just an empty magic trick thrusting them together.

Contemplatively, Ezra slowly ran his fingers along his jaw. "You live as long as I do, you think you've felt all the feelings, seen everything there is to see. It's hard to be surprised. But, Ricki, I've never experienced anything like you. You knock me senseless."

"Oh."

"The beauty you create in the world. Your optimism, your brain. Your fascination with being fascinated. The way your face fits perfectly under my chin when we're sleeping. Your tenderness, whether your focus is on the care of a single flower, or… me." His gaze was unwavering. "Ricki, you've turned me upside down. For so long, I've lived life like it was something to endure, to push through. But with you? I know how precious it can be. And I refuse to live in a world without you in it."

Ricki's heart thundered in her chest. "You… feel all those things for me?"

"I do," he said quietly. "And I know in my bones that I'd feel them hex or no hex."

"Me too. I feel so much, it scares me," she whispered, overwhelmed. The stakes were so high. Ricki wanted a quiet, normal life, to run her little shop, be at peace. And yes, she longed for a passionate romance. But this specific passionate romance? Featuring an immortal lover and a premature death sentence? No.

She couldn’t die. So much was unfinished! Ezra needed his person. Ms. Della needed her granddaughter. Tuesday needed her best friend. Wilde Things needed its creative force. And her family… well, that was another

story. She was comic relief to them, at best. But deep down, she'd always hoped to receive their acceptance. Maybe, with a bit more time, she'd get it.

All these emotions and desires crashed inside of her and then coalesced into one single-minded purpose.

"Ezra, what if we could find a way to break the curse? You'd be mortal, and I'd be saved from death in ten days. We'd be free from this madness."

Ricki showed Ezra her phone. "I've done some research on how to reverse hexes, and this diagnostic quiz came up. Before we do anything, we have to be sure it's a curse."

She'd pulled up a screenshot of a quiz she'd found on ReverseTheCurse.com.

- **Is there someone in your life that you have angered or offended in some way?**
- **Is that person someone who has the magical knowledge to place a harmful spell on you?**
- **Is a hex or curse the only possible explanation for what is happening to you?**

Ezra glanced from the screen to Ricki. "Yes, yes, and yes."

"I thought so—just wanted to do this right. Here's the good news. I've made three appointments with spiritual specialists," she announced with pride. "One of them has to work."

"Spiritual specialists?" Ezra looked skeptical. "Felice used *dark voodoo*. It's powerful magic, not 'bad vibes' or 'negative energy.'"

"I knew you'd say that. Which is why I've found authentic spell-reversal experts!"

"I appreciate your effort. I do. But every so-called medium or psychic I've ever met is a hack. If all it took was the Psychic Friends Network, I could've wrapped this up ages ago."

Ricki bit her lip. "Did you… actually call the Psychic Friends Network?"

“Those Dionne Warwick infomercials were very persuasive.” He sighed. “I don’t know, the ’90s were bleak.”

“First of all, I would never waste our time with fakes. I’ve thoroughly

vetted and researched these specialists. Secondly, have you heard of Yelp?" "Of course I've heard of Yelp." He paused. "No, I haven't heard of Yelp."

"Well, let's just say these women have very satisfied customers. Trust me." And then she leaned forward onto the table, dead serious in her desperation. "Ezra, listen to me. You have to go along with this, because we don't have any other options. It's my life on the line. Get it?"

Ezra's eyes widened at her intensity. "Got it."

"Good." She sat back in her chair. "Also, after extensive research on PaybacksAWitch.com, I learned that when an immortality curse is broken, the immortal returns to the same age they were pre-hex. We'd be the same age. At the same time. You could start over. With me."

Her brave earnestness hit something soft in Ezra, and he reached across the table and held her hand.

Ricki had forgotten what happened when they touched. Shimmering warmth rippled through her in waves. Her palm tingled long after he dropped his hand.

Their first stop was Madame Sessy, a bright-eyed, round, middle-aged woman with a shock of auburn hair ornamented with a rhinestone-studded headband. Her office was nestled above a Chinese massage parlor on West 24th Street. It was the kind of place Ezra had seen a million times. Gaudy sign in the window, flashing PSYCHIC in aggressive neon green.

This was a long shot, but deep down, a vague ribbon of hope ran through him. He'd never shared his story with anyone, and he'd walked alone in it for too long. But now, knowing that Ricki was walking with him, it lessened the despair. In fact, after confiding in her about everything—the church fire, Sonny—he felt more alive than he had in decades.

Most likely, this psychic would be a waste of time. But

what if she wasn’t?

They sat down on plastic folding chairs across from Madame Sessy, who was perched on a wicker throne, 1983 bridal shower edition. And then, with

animated hopefulness, Ricki explained their situation. Madame Sessy nodded while setting an actual crystal ball on the aluminum coffee table between her and her guests.

"This is an underworld issue." *Ziss iss an undahverld eeeshew.* "According to astrology, the underworld is in the Fourth House, which is the house of the ancestors. It's a dark labyrinth populated by old gods, old wounds, and restless souls. Mr. Ezra, the curse cast you down into the underworld, a purgatory of sorts, where you're barred from the human experience." And then she shouted, "WITH NO WAY OUT!"

Surprised, Ricki and Ezra reflexively jumped in their creaky seats. "What you need," Madame Sessy continued, "is a psychopomp." "And circumstance?" joked Ricki.

Ezra snickered, and the psychic glared at them both.

"A psychopomp is a guide to escort Mr. Ezra out of the underworld. Mr. Ezra, I'm happy to be your symbolic psychopomp, leading you by torchlight back to mortality. It's a painless ritual involving special candles, essential oils, and a large aluminum gong."

"Appreciate you," he said with his usual cordiality. "May I ask what it'll cost?"

"For you? Sixteen thousand dollars, flat." "I see."

"In Amex gift cards," she said without a trace of an accent, "if you have them."

Their next stop was an energy healer located a fifty-minute train ride away, in Bed-Stuy, Brooklyn. Phoebe Lore was a middle-aged Black woman wearing a floor-length tunic and a yellow snapback with the word STONER across the front. She welcomed them into her bohemian-chic studio, which she shared with a tantric yogi. In one corner, a sweaty hetero couple was locked in a tangle of limbs as a man-bunned dude in a leotard coached their breathing.

With its sleek wood floors, exposed brick walls, and patchouli candles,

the space oozed upscale chill. A bit of Ricki's earlier optimism was fading, but she remained undeterred. Besides, since she was a sucker for aesthetics, the carefully curated decor made her feel like she was in professional hands. Ezra and Ricki settled into a suede love seat and took in Phoebe's advice.

"What you need," announced Phoebe, "is a magic mirror box." "A magic mirror box," repeated Ezra, massaging a temple.

"I place a mirror in a wooden box, along with something that represents the person cursing you. A photo, a doll, et cetera. Then the mirror reflects that person's curse back onto them."

"The curser's deceased," noted Ricki. "Can she absorb magic from beyond the grave?"

"Don't see why not!"

Ricki turned toward Ezra and whispered, "The pearl bracelet." "You don't seriously believe this'll work?"

"I trust her. Look at that majestic tunic; she looks so authentic." "Authentic to what, though?" whispered Ezra. "Biggie's face is silk-screened on that tunic. All that tells me is she's representin' BK to the fullest."

Ricki blinked. "You know that phrase?"

"I told you, music references, I know." And then Ezra forgot himself and started talking. Ricki's presence had that effect on him. "Besides, I helped write 'Unbelievable.' I had a dog-walking job over on Fulton around '92, and I overheard this oversized kid outside a bodega, mumbling bars under his breath. His lyric was *Live from Bedford-Stuyvesant, Voletta's son*, but I suggested *Live from Bedford-Stuyvesant, the livest one*. 'Cause it was braggier."

"'92?" Phoebe frowned. "You were wordsmithing like that as an embryo?"

"No less believable than a magic mirror box," grumbled Ezra.

Clearing her throat, Ricki asked, "How long does it take for the mirror to work?"

“At least one month, sometimes up to six.”

“One month?” She tried to stave off rising panic. “We need to break the curse by the twenty-ninth! Do you have a rush option?”

“What, like a mystical FedEx?” Phoebe scoffed. “Sorry I can’t be of help. Love and light, though.”

The last and final stop was a Wiccan in Astoria, Queens. A chipper, extraordinarily pale woman with honey-blond curls, Mistress Jojo was cloaked in dark jeans, a black sweatshirt, and tons of black eye shadow. A pentagram was tattooed on the back of her right hand, and her office was just as goth, with black curtains and black candles.

Ezra and Ricki sat down on oversized black floor pillows. This time, Ricki was out-and-out desperate. She'd broken out in a sweat, and she was chewing the inside of her mouth anxiously. This had to work.

Meanwhile, the small spark of hope Ezra had felt at the start of the day had completely vanished. He just wanted Ricki, a nap, and preferably both, together. The spiritualist thing was an obvious hustle. But they weren't marks ready to be swindled.

Ezra had always wished he could die like everyone else, to end the grinding repetitiveness of living. But now there was Ricki. He couldn't imagine life without her. If they didn't solve this, she'd have only ten days left—and it would end in an early death that *he caused*, just as surely as if he'd fired a gun or administered poison. The guilt eating away at the edges of his heart was monstrous. There had to be a solve. But this wasn't it.

"To curse someone, you obviously need magic," Jojo was saying. "Magic is activated by words and desire. I don't mean desire in a sexual way. I mean desire as a primal need. The need might be self-sabotaging or dangerous, but it's very real. The fact that you've been immortal since 1928? That's powerful magic, and as all spiritualists know, *self-magic* is the most potent. So I have to ask, are you sure your ex-girlfriend cursed you?"

Ezra was tired. And he didn't love her tone. "Apologies, ma'am, I don't follow."

"Maybe you cursed yourself."

"Respectfully, why would I do

that?"

“I don’t know.” Her voice dripped with condescension.

“You tell me.”

Now Ezra was angry. He shouldn’t have to prove his story to this cheap grifter.

“This is gaslighting,” scolded Ricki. “Ezra knows what happened to him. He was there.”

Jojo chuckled. “With all due respect, sometimes when we self-sabotage, it feels safer to blame an outside party. It’s easier to process being wronged by a villain, rather than yourself.”

“Interesting theory,” said Ezra, “but I didn’t curse myself.”

“Well, just to be sure, let’s perform the Bond-Cutting Ceremony!” She reached into a clunky wooden chest and pulled out two black wooden blocks connected by a foot of twine tied to each. “Just cut the twine with this magic knife. It’s pure sterling silver, sprinkled with salt and garlic. As you cut, say this out loud: 'I sever and release the bonds I placed upon myself.’”

Ezra’s eyes narrowed, and his posture went rigid. “I’ll say this one more time…”

“First of all,” interrupted Ricki, who was visibly pissed, “silver, salt, and garlic are vampire killers. Ezra’s not a vampire, got it? Secondly, the substances we think of as protection against vampires are actually just antibacterial. Salt and garlic protected against infections and illnesses that, centuries ago, we’d attribute to some spooky influence. I’d *think* a Wiccan would *know* that. And by the way, this is why Black people distrust health- care professionals. We’re not taken seriously.” She caught her breath. “So. Are you going to listen to him or not?”

Ezra sat there with full-on heart eyes and a modest hard-on. Did Little Richard Wilde just square up on a witch for him? Was he just figuratively little-spooned? He was in awe! No one had ever stood up for him like that. A woman had never been his knight in shining armor. He was used to being the rescuer.

It was the sexiest thing he’d ever seen.

“I understand, hon. But I think we can agree that a Bond-Cutting Ceremony couldn’t hurt. Ezra, would you mind doing the honors? I filed a trademark on the Bond-Cutting Knife, by the way. Ricki, would you mind taking a pic for the Gram?”

With steadfast calm, Ezra took the knife from her. He cut the twine. “There you go!” exclaimed Mistress Jojo.

“Curse broken. How do you feel?”

Out of the corner of his mouth, Ezra muttered to Ricki, “Trigger warning.”

“Huh?”

And then, lightning fast, Ezra covered Ricki's eyes with his left hand. With his right, he plunged the knife into his heart. After a few beats, he easily yanked it out. The blade was faintly tinged with blood, but in a few seconds, it swiftly evaporated into nothing. All that remained was a slight slit in his coat, over his heart.

With a pleasant smile, he handed the knife back to Jojo. "I'm good.
You?"

Eyes open, Ricki looked at the knife, looked at Mistress Jojo, and looked at Ezra, and her hands flew to her cheeks. "Oh my God. Oh my God. OH MY GOD…"

On the fifth "oh my God," Ricki snapped out of her shock. She grabbed Ezra's arm and pulled him out of his chair. Before rushing out the door, she threw a twenty in the Wiccan's lap and said, "Don't worry, you won't remember him in a month."

Several blocks away from Mistress Jojo's office, Ricki and Ezra descended into an E train station, enveloped in the warmth of the nearly empty platform.

Ricki stood in front of Ezra, shaking uncontrollably. And babbling. And pacing.

"Jesus Christ, Ezra. You really are immortal. A Perennial. Holy shit, this is real."

"You said you believed me!"

"Did it hurt? Should I call 911?" Frantically, she patted her hands over the front of his coat and shouted into the uncrowded platform, "*ANY DOCTORS IN THE HOUSE?*"

Over on the nearest bench, an elderly, bespectacled gentleman glanced up from his *New York Post*. "My oldest niece is an orthopedic surgeon. But she lives in Des Moines."

"All good, sir, thank you." Leading Ricki farther down the platform, Ezra whispered, "I'm fine! I don't feel pain like mortals. At most, it's like a light scratch. And I heal right away."

"Are you sure?"

“You could chop off my hand, and to me, it’d feel like a paper cut.
Breathe, just breathe.”

They stopped walking, and he ran his hands over the tops of her arms, trying to warm her up and calm her down. She allowed herself to be soothed.

“I didn’t want to scare you,” he assured her. “I was just tired of being questioned.”

“I know you’re tired.” She breathed out, and soon her shakes subsided. Her breath steadied. And then she peered up at him with brazen confidence.

“I have one more idea. Ever heard of Eva Mercy?”

CHAPTER 19

THE FORREST GUMP OF MUSIC

February 20, 2024

Della was extremely concerned about Ricki. Della thought her granddaughter had lost her mind, and had taken to discussing it with everyone she knew. On a covert phone call with Tuesday, she whispered, “That girl’s acting stranger than a soup sandwich.” Over breakfast with Naaz, she said, “That girl’s acting like she ain’t got but one oar in the water.” On another phone call, to her Links walking club, she announced, “That girl’s acting three pickles shy of a quart, if you get my meaning.”

Everyone got her meaning.

If the elder woman was freaking out a bit, it was understandable. Ricki had passed clean the hell out on her living room floor. And why? Because she’d shown her an antique pearl bracelet? It was odd. Plus, Della wasn’t convinced that Ricki was eating (or sleeping) properly, her eyes were starting to look faraway, and she often trailed off midsentence.

Whatever was going on with Ricki, at least she was as punctual as ever for their standing tea party. She arrived upstairs at Della’s triplex at exactly noon, and Naaz welcomed her with a bouquet of sunflowers.

Ricki had been invited to an intervention.

First of all, they were meeting in the dining room,

instead of the living room. And instead of Lorna Doones and crustless sandwiches, Della had arranged for Sylvia's Restaurant to deliver a gourmet meal: Sassy Wings,

Catfish Fingers, and Salmon Bites, Ricki's favorite dishes. Plus, Tuesday was there, legs crossed and arms folded, looking imperious.

Della greeted Ricki with a wide smile on her face. Today, she was feeling weaker than usual, so she blew Ricki several kisses from her dining chair instead of hopping up to give her a hug.

"What… is all of this?" Ricki lowered herself into a chair, eyes narrowed in suspicion.

"Have a Catfish Finger," suggested Tuesday, behaving as if her presence at tea was super normal.

"Don't look so distrustful," said Della. "Dear, you've been acting so strangely. You came to tea and passed clean out, mid-conversation. Naaz had to wallop you back to life! You closed the shop for two days, which you never do. You won't answer your phone. And Tuesday told me that you're dating a serial killer."

Stunned, Ricki shot a betrayed look at her friend.

"Well, what do you have to say for yourself?" asked Tuesday, who was wearing a stiff navy pantsuit with a modest chignon.

"Tuesday, what are you doing here? And why are you dressed like a district attorney?"

"Serious business calls for a serious outfit."

Naaz poked her head into the living room. "I like the suit; it's giving Marriott concierge."

"Naaz, *please*," huffed Della, who was in no mood for her relentless enthusiasm.

The nurse threw up a peace sign and exited.

"Look, I know I've been acting weird," started Ricki. "My whole life is turned upside down." She took a beat, trying to quell her nervousness. "Ms. Della. Tuesday. I have something to tell you both. It won't make any sense, at all. If you're worried about my mental health now, you'll want to have me committed by the end of this story. But please,

try to believe me. What I’m about to say is real.”

Ms. Della and Tuesday looked at each other, sighed, and nodded at Ricki.

Then Ricki spilled it all. She was already on the spot, so what good could come from holding back? She told them the story of Ezra "Breeze" Walker, his immortality, and her projected February 29 date with death. Without stopping, she revealed *practically* every detail, down to their tour of New York City's highest-rated spiritual specialists the day before.

She did leave out some important details: who cursed him, why, and where.

Without stopping to take a breath—or check to see if her audience was with her—Ricki talked and talked and talked. When she was done with her lengthy confession, she felt blissfully relieved. And starving. With a famished groan, she sat back and tore into a Sassy Wing.

Had she checked, she would've seen that her audience was visibly distraught. They both stared at her. Ms. Della had frozen with her teacup halfway to her lips. Tuesday's mouth was slightly agape, her eyes wide.

The silence was thick. And it lasted for minutes as an oblivious Ricki housed the entire platter of fried chicken. Tuesday was the first to speak. She cleared her throat, tapped her chignon into place, and went in.

"So, what I'm hearing you say is that Ezra Walker is a one-hundred- twenty-four-year-old man in twenty-eight-year-old cosplay, and you two are fated soulmates."

Ricki nodded eagerly, chomping on chicken. "Yes, that's it."

"And the reason y'all keep running into each other is not because he's a stalker, but because you're both involuntarily drawn to each other. Like lizards instinctively turning towards the sun."

"Lizards? I don't know that I'd put it like *that*…"

"And Ezra is basically the Forrest Gump of music, weaving in and out of important historical moments over the past century?"

"Forrest Gump is… a reach, but sure."

"Ricki!" Tuesday burst out laughing. "*Bitch*, why didn't

you just tell me this when I came over the other day?”

Ricki stopped chewing. “Wait. You believe me?”

“I’m relieved! I really did think you were on meth. You’ve been acting so secretive and shifty. Honestly, your story isn’t that crazy, you know. I once played a teenaged medium in a Hallmark Halloween movie called *If*

You've Got It, Haunt It, and it was based on a true story. For a whole summer, I hung out with the medium I was playing. She told me all about Perennials!"

"Seriously?"

"By the way, don't call Perennials vampires," Tuesday told Ms. Della. "They hate that."

Ricki was aghast. "Tuesday Rowe! You broke into Ezra's house. You told Ms. Della he was a serial killer and got her all worked up into an intervention! How dare you change your mind so easily. You're so reactive and dramatic."

Tuesday's brows shot to the ceiling. "Says the woman fucking a supernatural entity."

"Ladies, that's enough." Ms. Della looked extremely concerned but patient. And then, in the calm tone reserved for reasoning with toddlers and lunatics, she addressed Ricki. "Sugar, are you finished?"

"Well… no. There's more."

"Lord, help me over the fence," she exclaimed before coughing heartily into the crook of her arm. Then she gazed into her cup, looking as though she wished it contained something stronger than Earl Grey. Shaking her head, she placed the teacup atop the stack of plantable note cards Ricki had gifted her (she hadn't found a better use for them than "makeshift coaster").

Ricki held back, genuinely frightened to tell the rest. She hadn't planned on telling Ms. Della about Felice. It wasn't her place to reveal harsh truths about a woman Ms. Della never knew, the mother she'd surely spent her entire life building up in her head. When Ms. Della told Ricki that she bought the building to feel closer to her, to fill in the blanks of her history, she couldn't have known she'd find *this* out.

Telling her the truth felt cruel.

But now she was on the spot. Shoulders slumping, Ricki said, "I don't really know how to say this. Ms. Della, at first, I didn't believe Ezra's story about the curse. It's so far-fetched, it sounds like a fantasy. But when you told me about the history of 225½, your… uh… stories matched up. And then I knew it was true."

"I don't follow." Ms. Della coughed again.

Ricki hated seeing her so unwell. She seemed unusually fragile, almost like her pajamas were drowning her.

I need to have a private talk with Naaz, thought Ricki. *Ms. Della's not okay. It's obvious. And she's too proud to ever tell me what's wrong.*

"Should we let you rest?" asked Ricki. "We can talk about this another time."

"No, no, I'm fine," she responded, laying her beringed hand on her chest. "Ricki, what does my house's history have to do with Ezra?"

"Ezra was cursed at a rent party on February 29, 1928. It was held downstairs, Ms. Della. In Wilde Things. Like I said, Ezra's a pianist. And back then, he was a famous one, called Breeze Walker. The piano in my apartment? It was his. It was left in the house and boarded up all this time."

"Dear, that's ridiculous."

"Oh, I know," said Ricki. "But it's also true. And there's more. He's immortal because his then girlfriend cursed him. And her name was… Felice."

Ms. Della looked uncharacteristically stricken. And then she quickly collected herself.

"Felice who?" she asked.

"Fabienne."

Tuesday looked confused. "Who's Felice Fabienne?"

"My mother," said Ms. Della sharply. "Which is obviously impossible." "It isn't, though," said Ricki, her voice soft. "I don't know how to tell you this… so I'll just spit it out. Felice cursed him on the roof and then committed suicide. Which matches up with your story. That pearl bracelet you showed me? Ezra gave it to her. His monogram is inscribed on it. BW + FF. Breeze Walker plus Felice Fabienne."

Tuesday gasped, clapping her palm over her mouth.

"Felice wanted him to marry her and move back to Louisiana to be with her baby, but he… he turned her down. And she was furious."

Ms. Della made a scoffing sound and smoothed out the wrinkles in her pajama pants. "Ricki, you can't possibly believe such a thing."

"I wish it wasn't true, Ms. Della." Ricki's voice was trembling in shame. "I'm so sorry. I hate that I…"

The older woman held up a wrinkled, shaky index finger at Ricki, signaling for her to stop talking—now. When Ms. Della spoke, her voice was witheringly sharp.

"You do realize, *Ricki,* that there's nothing new about a man blaming his

ex for every wrong turn that's happened in his life. Women are blamed for all the ills of the world." Her eyes narrowed. "Don't be naive. Every baby mama is a B-word; every ex-wife is crazy. The second wife is trained to hate the first. Somewhere, right this second, one of your ex-boyfriends is telling some girl you're a witch."

"Men do be vilifying exes." Tuesday nodded.

"Believe me, I know," whispered Ricki, her voice unsteady. "But this time it's different. Ms. Della…"

"What, dear?" she asked in a thin voice, her patience worn.

"Ezra told me that Felice's daughter was named Adelaide. He told me this *before* you told me your real name. How would he know that?"

Ms. Della huffed out an exasperated sound.

"Do you know why Felice named you Adelaide?"

"No, and neither do you. And neither, certainly, does Ezra."

Worriedly, Ricki chewed on her bottom lip and glanced at Tuesday, who gave her an encouraging nod. And so she kept talking. "Felice named you after her idol, Adelaide Hall. She was one of the first Black Broadway stars. And she inspired Felice to move to Harlem and become a dancer."

A mighty exhale escaped from Ms. Della, leaving her looking smaller than ever. It was almost as if she had deflated.

"Felice loved you so much. Ezra said so. She was working hard to raise enough money to send for you. Everything she did was for you."

"That's enough," said Ms. Della, fingering a napkin.

"It's true. I wish it wasn't. Because it also means I'm going to die in nine days."

"Girl, please, you're not going anywhere," scoffed Tuesday.

"But everything else in the curse has come true. Ezra's immortal; I even saw him stab himself and not get hurt! My face has haunted him every leap year February for over a century. He heard notes to a song for decades, but it never

came together till he met me. I’m the soulmate he was cursed to lose. I’m going to die the same day Felice did.”

Ms. Della pulled off her red-framed glasses and set them on the table. Gingerly, she rubbed her eyes. “I’ve heard enough. All this dark magic and sorcery is not of the Lord. You both are welcome to stay, but I’m going to take a nap.”

Naaz, who’d been listening at the door, skipped into the room and stood

behind Ms. Della, helping her out of the chair.

Crushed by guilt, Ricki ran over to Ms. Della and clasped her delicate, thin-skinned hands in hers. The last thing she ever wanted to do was upset her grandmother. She knew that in a certain light, the whole thing looked like another one of her catastrophic flights of fancy. Another example of her being just “too much.”

“I’m so sorry,” Ricki apologized, on the edge of tears. “You know I wouldn’t tell you all of this if it wasn’t true. And I understand if you need some time.”

Ms. Della disentangled her hands from Ricki’s. “I love you like you’re my own. But let’s end the conversation here. And know this: the villain depends on who’s telling the story.”

Then Naaz carefully led Ms. Della from the room. And Ricki plopped back down on her chair, resting her head on the table.

“I believe you, don’t worry.” Tuesday nibbled on a Catfish Finger. “I won’t let you die. Even if I have to lock you in a closet or something.”

“I will never forgive myself for hurting Ms. Della,” mumbled Ricki. “I don’t think she’ll ever forgive me, either. *Fuck.*” She raised her head off the table. “Sorry.”

“Are you really apologizing for saying 'fuck’?”

“Oh. That’s Ezra. He doesn’t like to curse in front of me. He’s so gallant, in an old-fashioned way. He says 'malarkey’ and 'spectacles.’” She shrugged and smiled softly. “It’s cute.”

Tuesday’s eyes widened, and a slow grin split her face.

“Girl. You *liiiike*
him.”

“Stop.”

“You do. It’s all over you. You’re like a character in that series you’re always reading. Those supernatural erotic stories.”

“Speaking of, I should go. I have a ticket to Eva Mercy’s book reading at Sister’s Uptown Bookstore. It starts in an hour, and my entire future may depend on it.”

“No shade, babe, but if this is your last week on Earth,

you’re choosing to prioritize a book reading?”

“It’s not just any reading, Tuesday. She’s a voodoo expert. I’m going to ask her how to reverse the curse.”

Breathe, Ricki, she thought to herself. *This could be it, the thing that*

saves me and Ezra.

"Here's the thing," explained Ricki. "Eva Mercy has Louisiana Creole heritage, like Felice. She writes the *Cursed* books I'm always reading. Anyway, she's been researching her ancestors down on the bayou and has become an expert on folk magic. She just wrote a fascinating piece in the *New Yorker* about hoodoo, voodoo, and the intersection of African religious traditions and Catholicism in the New World, et cetera, et cetera. Did you read it?"

"No, now that I'm a writer, I don't have time to do anything but procrastinate, masturbate, and cry."

"Well, she's knowledgeable. If anyone knows how to save me and Ezra, it'll be her."

"Godspeed," said Tuesday. "And Ricki? Be careful."

An hour later, Ricki was sitting in a crowded space at Sister's Uptown, an intimate Washington Heights bookstore with a bright purple awning you could spot blocks away. The twenty-year-old shop smelled of fresh paper, coconut oil, and positive community vibes. Ricki knew she was in a room full of *Cursed* stans, because half the audience was wearing purple witch hats in honor of the series protagonist, Gia, a badass witch.

Why didn't I bring my hat from Atlanta? Ricki thought. *Out here looking like a fake fan.*

But, alas, she had bigger problems than a hat. After only five months in New York City, Ricki had done a brilliant job of ruining her life on every fucking level. Except professionally—though pretty soon, that wouldn't matter, either. Nothing would.

She'd made it just in time, thank God. Tonight wasn't just about *Cursed*; Eva Mercy was also speaking about her folk magic research and upcoming memoir. Eva was as cute and relatable as she seemed on Instagram. With her horn-rimmed glasses, DMX concert tee, and Adidas, her vibe was "your best friend's cool big sister." And since Ricki recognized her from Insta, she knew that Eva's

teenage daughter, Audre, was sitting in the front row, chewing gum with boredom. She looked like a Disney princess, but festival. Ricki sat in the audience, listening, trying to forget that she was a dead woman walking. And that she was deeply entangled with a man she

couldn’t have. And that she’d possibly ruined her relationship with Ms. Della, one of the most important people in her life. And, because it bore repeating, that she was a dead woman walking.

Eva Mercy was her last hope.

“As we know, so many religions are patriarchal, because men were the ones making the rules, right?” Eva was almost at the end of her reading, standing at a wooden podium in the front of the room, spitting straight facts. “But voodoo was very female centered. Enslaved West Africans and Haitian revolutionaries originally brought voodoo to Louisiana, which was then infused with the dominant religion, Catholicism. It was a powerful alternative to European-based Christianity.

“But voodoo was so much more than a religion, honestly. It was special because at a time when whites controlled everything, voodoo was exclusively ours. White people didn’t understand it. So it gave Black people a sense of power and protection.”

She grinned and held up a Black Power fist, to delighted applause. A room full of bookish women in purple witch hats raised their fists in the air. Ricki got chills. Despite her desperate situation, she felt like a member of the most powerful coven on Earth.

“And then, during the Great Migration period, Southern Black people brought the religion up north to urbanized cities like Chicago, Denver, Kansas City, and, of course, Harlem. It was folded into so many creative expressions: song, dance, books. It’s a little sad that so many modern Black Christians are fearful of the religion. It *isn’t* inherently dark or evil. White supremacy taught us that voodoo was the stuff of savages, that it was satanic, simply because it was a religion that, to them, gave their human property too much power. But it’s far from evil! Voodoo itself is harmless and peaceful. But like any faith, when it’s used for darkness, it can be dangerous. If you evoke a spirit to harm someone, using curses, potions, and charms, you’ll cause damage.”

Given Eva had introduced the topic of dark voodoo and

curses, Ricki decided that this was the perfect time to ask her question.

Feeling her forehead go dewy with nervousness, Ricki shot her hand up. “Hi, my name is Ricki Wilde, and I’m a massive, massive stan. Beyond. And I… just have a quick question.”

“Hi, Ricki,” she said, smiling while absentmindedly massaging a temple.

“Ask away!”

Ricki noticed that Eva Mercy kept rubbing her head. She’d read somewhere that the author had been plagued by inexplicable daily migraines her whole life. Talk about a curse.

“Well, I once heard a story about a woman who put a terrible hex on a man right before committing suicide. She was a powerful priestess, I guess, because every part of the hex came true. Is there any way to reverse such a curse?”

“Good question.” Eva nodded slowly, taking in the details. She slid her glasses up her nose. “You said the woman who cursed him committed suicide right afterwards?”

“Yes.”

“Mmm. Not good,” Eva said with a grimace. She paused, rubbing her temple again. “To carry out a dark voodoo curse, you must first beckon a loa, another word for a god. I’d assume she called on Met Kalfu, the loa of black magic. To summon him, though, a sacrifice must first be made. And in the case of a very dark curse, like this one? A human death would be the sacrifice. Which is why she killed herself, I’m sure.”

All the blood drained from Ricki’s face. Her hands went clammy, and she saw bleary dark spots before her eyes.

“Oh,” she responded in a small voice.

“To answer your question,” continued Eva, “a mirror sacrifice must be made to reverse the curse.”

“You mean, another human death.”

“Yep!” Eva said gleefully. The audience broke out in soft laughter. Eva giggled a little herself and then seemed to flinch in pain.

“Sorry, guys,” said Eva. “You know I love all this witchy stuff.”

Ricki saw the author’s eyes wander to the back of the room. Eva mouthed *No* to someone—a hummingbird-fast exchange—and then she pasted on a professional smile and took another question from the audience. Ricki looked over her shoulder. In the back row, she spotted an absurdly handsome man with hazel-amber eyes. He’d

lifted up a piece of paper reading ARE YOU OKAY? Ricki recognized him as Shane Hall, the bestselling author and Eva's husband.

Just then, Shane got up from his seat and whispered something to the

host, who then came up to the front beside Eva.

"Sadly, we'll have to wrap up a few minutes early," said the host, "but this has been wonderful. Give Eva Mercy a great big hand! Signed copies of the *Cursed* series are up front. And look out for her ancestral memoir, *Belle Fleur*, when it launches next year!"

Eva thanked the crowd warmly and was swarmed by readers. As it was all happening, Ricki noticed how she looked at Shane with such gratefulness and affection, it almost felt too intimate for the room. It was a tender, sweet moment, two people so in sync that they almost communicated in sign language. A husband so concerned for his wife's well-being that he knew when she'd had enough, and advocated for her. It was adult, responsible love. And so romantic.

It's something I'll never have, she thought, stumbling out of the store in a haze of terror and despair. Reality had just struck her between the eyes, as sure as if she'd been shot.

If someone has to die to reverse Ezra's curse, then February 29 really will be my last day on Earth, she thought. *Only a monster would sacrifice another person to stay alive.*

Dazed, Ricki wandered outside into the cold. She walked and walked for endless blocks. Washington Heights was a foreign neighborhood to her; she didn't know where she was going, but it didn't matter. Nothing mattered. Tears began coursing down her cheeks, and she paced faster and faster. She didn't bother wiping the tears; she just let them fall, because what was the point? There'd just be more.

Ricki had been holding it together until this point, but now the floodgates were open. She had to face the reality that this was the end. Of everything. God, she wasn't ready to go.

And she wasn't ready to lose Ezra. All she wanted was him. His touch, his arms, his heart, his everything. Blinded by her tears, she kept going— heading uptown or downtown, she had no idea—until she felt herself being swept into a powerful embrace.

Without opening her eyes, she knew it was him. She

could smell him.

Feel him.

Ezra. Of course it was Ezra. They gravitated toward each other, the magnetic pull they couldn’t fight, even if they wanted to.

“You’re here.” She wept into his chest, gripping his coat in her fists.

“I’m here—you’re safe,” he said, kissing the top of her head. “Just cry.
Let it out.”

Ezra walked her to a nearby bench in front of a café. There, he held her and let her sob against him for however long she needed. He didn’t ask any questions or prod or say that he’d magically fix anything. There were no easy answers, just emotions.

Time was stretchy. Several lattes and hot cocoas later, the sky had turned dusky. The sun was setting. Finally, after endless silence, Ricki spoke. They were sitting side by side, her head leaning on his shoulder.

“I thought you hated hugs,”
she said. “I do hate hugs. But
I like you.”

Despite her tears, Ricki smiled. “You like me, huh?”

Ezra pulled away a bit and then cupped her cheeks in his hands, tilting her face up to his. His expression was beatific, radiant with adoration.

“I love you,” he said.

Ricki gasped softly. “You
do?” He nodded, his gaze
vulnerable. “I love you,
too,” she whispered.

In the grand scheme of things, they’d known each other for only a blip in time. But for Ezra and Ricki, there was no point in playing hard to get or pretending that their feelings weren’t as intense as they were. They didn’t have time, but they had each other. And all they could do was cling to this one, extremely obvious truth.

Ezra’s face split into a wondrous grin. “I wanted to say it in Starbucks.”

“Why didn’t you?”

“You can’t tell a woman you love her for the first time in Starbucks!” “How would you know what’s appropriate Starbucks behavior; you’ve
never…”

Ezra interrupted her with a knee-buckling, soul-stirring, dizzying kiss. He kissed her till her lips were puffy and her

skin was raw from the scruff of his five-o’clock shadow. He kissed her like he had all the time in the world, until the truth felt fake, dark was light, and their looming fate was all a terrible, terrible dream.

CHAPTER 20

SEX BREAK

February 21–25, 2024

If everything was going to fall apart, there was nothing Ricki and Ezra could do about it. So, together, they made a mature, adult decision. They decided to throw themselves into each other, no safety net, no hesitation, just full-blown, unfiltered passion. Really, what other option did they have? Were they going to waste the precious days they had left together shaking their fists at the gods and bemoaning their fate? No. There was no point or time.

Most importantly, they certainly weren't going to commit murder in order to break Ezra's curse. So for now, they'd make every moment together count.

But the blind panic, anger, and fear were never far. The reality of Ricki's death sentence—including the knowledge that Ezra would continue to live forever after the bittersweet agony of loving and then losing her—simmered just below the surface. It threatened to explode whenever things got a bit too still, too quiet. Like in the few breaths before dozing off, or the pauses between conversation.

The only way to drown the Bad Thoughts? Fill up every moment with an experience! Ezra and Ricki ran around the city together, hungry to find new ways to entertain themselves, to delight in each other. Together, they did more in the next week than they ever had apart. (Well,

Ricki, at least.

When it came to lived experience, there was no competing with a Perennial.) If this was the end, they were going to go out on top.

They took a mixology class at Apotheke in Chinatown and delighted in tasting a secret “Dining in the Dark” menu at Leuca restaurant in Williamsburg while blindfolded. They dropped by the Comedy Cellar one night, where they had the honor of being roasted by a famous comic (and occasional Oscar host) for making out during his act. They spent too long driving dangerously at the bumper cars in Coney Island and were gently asked to let the actual children in line get a turn. They watched the sun set over the harbor from the Staten Island Ferry. They broke into the breathtaking, partially hidden, and quite exclusive Gramercy Park for a pizza picnic with Focaccia the dog (historically, entrance was granted to only a few elite neighborhood residents, but thanks to a short-lived 1962 dalliance with the frisky wife of a publishing tycoon, Ezra had a key). They spontaneously joined several out-of-towners on a Doughnut Walking Tour of the Upper West Side, and afterward, on a sugar high, Ricki convinced Ezra to teach her how to play “We Don’t Talk About Bruno” on his old piano.

In the interest of not wasting a moment apart, Ezra unofficially moved in with Ricki. Yes, her studio was a mere fraction of the size of his house, but his place was more of a petrified museum than a home. And besides, she was still running Wilde Things. She couldn’t give it up.

And now, more than ever, she was compelled to whip up more fantastical bouquets and place them at Old Harlem hot spots. It felt like an offering. Like small thank-yous to her adopted city for being so welcoming, so nurturing, even if for a short time. And now Ezra accompanied her on these early-morning missions. Hand clasping hers, he’d divulge insider anecdotes about each place, small details that made her captions pulse with vibrancy, making the Harlem Renaissance feel *alive*. It was manna for Insta history buffs.

When they were home, they talked and talked, stories spilling from each other in an ecstatic tumble as time

folded in on them. They often realized they had the same thoughts in their brains, or Ricki would articulate something out loud that Ezra'd once thought, *verbatim*, and vice versa. There was an energetic crackle between them, and the charge never abated.

The other thing they did a lot of? Fucking. They'd discovered that truly

transformative, life-altering sex made them feel like everything would be fine. It was a heady drug, lulling them into a sweet sense of security. So they kept doing it. They did it on every surface, in increasingly creative positions. They did it half-asleep. They did it after downing two bottles of dry white. They did it in the 145th Street Community Garden at 2:45 p.m. They did it, perhaps, a bit too much.

When they awoke on the twenty-fifth, they were tapped out. So Ricki closed the shop for the day. And the two declared they were taking a sex break. They were enjoying a languid, lazy morning all tangled up in her rumpled linen sheets, warmed by the sunrays beaming in through the window, a porcelain tray of half-eaten croissants and coffee cast aside on the nightstand.

“I don’t know why I wasted so much time hating hugs,” murmured Ezra drowsily. Ricki was little-spooned in his strong arms, her legs tangled with his. Save for panties and boxer briefs, they were in their preferred state: naked. He buried his face in her hair, inhaling the minty scent of her shampoo. “What’s not to love? Hugging is the cat’s meow.”

Ricki smiled widely, burrowing into his embrace. “It’s extremely the cat’s meow.”

“It’s incredible—I don’t feel self-conscious about linguitching around you. It’s nice not having to worry about tripping myself up with extinct slang. Usually, I open my mouth and I fear a pterodactyl will come flying out.”

“I’m just waiting for you to call me a jive turkey,” Ricki said, laughing.

It was a sound now more familiar to him than anything lodged in his endless memory. He let his eyes shut, soaking in how deliciously safe and secure he felt holding her. Memorizing the moment. Basking. This was the only place he ever wanted to be. Time seemed to yawn and stretch, and then, for the first time in the last four days, reality started to creep in.

She must’ve felt it, too. She stiffened a little in his arms. “Ezra?”

“Little Richard?”

“I can’t die before I’m thirty,” she whispered, barely audible. “I can’t leave you here alone. Without me. And I’m… just not ready to go. It’s not my time.”

It was The Thing They No Longer Discussed.

“I won’t let you,” he said simply. “I won’t let you leave my sight. I’ll check you in to the ER on the twenty-eighth. I’ll do *something*.”

“Short of committing a blood sacrifice, there’s nothing you can do. We’re not killing anyone.” Ricki turned herself around in his arms so that they were facing each other, almost nose to nose. “I had a thought, though. What if you make me a Perennial? Then we could both live forever.”

“Can’t,” he said, his brow pinched. “It doesn’t work like that. Immortality is something done to you; you can’t seek it out or ask for it. Dr. Arroyo-Abril told me that the day we met.”

“How did she become immortal?” “You really want to know?”

“So badly.”

“Well, she was a grifter. Too bad this all happened in 1883, or I reckon she’d be the subject of a Netflix docuseries. Anyway, she conned her way through Europe and then somehow ended up in Florida. Saint Augustine. Heard of it?”

“Yeah, it’s where that Spanish explorer, Ponce de León, decided some little spring was the Fountain of Youth,” said Ricki, putting her minor in American history to good use.

“That’s the place,” said Ezra. “By the 1880s, locals no longer believed the well had magical anti-aging properties. But tourists did. And Pilar sold them bottles of the spring water at a roadside stand. One day, she accidentally fell into the well, broke her neck, and drowned.”

“Stop.”

“Well, she should’ve drowned. Instead, she came to, popped her neck back in place, climbed out the well, and she’s been fifty-seven years old ever since. Turns out the Fountain of Youth? Not fake,” he explained. “Trying to game nature rarely works out in your favor.”

“Is she still a grifter?”

Ezra kissed the tip of Ricki’s nose. “Depends on if you believe in life coaches.”

He looked at her for a long time, trying to reconcile the

depth of his longing for her with the grim reality of their situation. It felt impossible to face. Maybe he should've been used to loss by now. All that practice should have made it easier. But this pain was excruciating, like nothing else. He was going to lose her. Just like his family, and like everyone he ever knew.

For a long time after he became a Perennial, he'd spy on his contemporaries. When he was in Harlem, he'd follow them around—on foot, in a car—wishing he could be living his regular life with them instead of watching them from blocks away. Or he'd track their progress in *Ebony* or *Jet*, filled with envy and longing. Lo opened a fancy dance studio—still one of the country's finest—and moved in with a ballerina she pretended was her "friend" till they died of old age, six months apart. He saw Duke go from a glitzy upstart to Establishment to a well-paid nostalgia act. A brain tumor killed George Gershwin a few years after he composed *Porgy and Bess*. Mickey Macchione became a wholesale flower trader and never set foot in another cabaret after Eden Lounge burned down. As time flew on, Ezra saw Josephine's, Bessie's, Zora's, and Langston's names loaned to art schools and scholarships, their legacies now the subject of biopics and documentaries. Today, they were icons, but to him, they were people he'd traded dreams with, caroused with, borrowed and lent a few coins to, run into at the dry cleaner's. Back then, they were all drinking from the same water. As time marched on, he remained frozen in amber, while they stretched and blossomed and, eventually, wilted. Like normal people do.

He ached to be normal with Ricki. To have a family, put down roots. Go gray, get paunchy, spoil their grandchildren. Sometimes, he even wondered what it would've been like if he'd met Ricki a century ago. Who would she have been?

"Who were you, in your heyday?" asked Ricki, mirroring his thoughts. "I've been stalking these vintage newsreel accounts on TikTok, hoping to spot you in the background of some glitchy black-and-white clip. I can't imagine you living in such a buttoned-up, old-fashioned culture. Like, mayhem ensued when a lady exposed a knee!"

"It wasn't like that, though," he said, chuckling. "The teens and '20s were decadent."

"It's wild to think of old people being young, doing young things."

"Is it? Old people are always dismissed as neutered,

benign. Like teddy bears. But when I pass an elderly lady on the street, I wonder who she used to be. ’Cause the women I knew?” His expression went wicked. “I could tell you some secrets about these memaws out here…”

Ricki yelped, nudging him with an elbow. “Spare me the details of your ancient ho-ing!”

“Are you really slut-bullying me in 2024? We’ve come too far as a culture.”

“Slut-*shaming*.”

“Whatever y’all call it. I’m just saying, every generation thinks they invented sex.”

“Yeah, yeah, yeah, I know what you’re saying.” Ricki propped her head on her hand. A quiet buzz of happiness thrummed through her. It made no sense. She was knocking on death’s door, staring into the barrel of a gun, but when she was with Ezra, she couldn’t shake the feeling that her demise wasn’t really real. Impassioned love never protected anyone, not really. But with Ezra, it felt like armor.

And it was a dangerous deception.

She chased the thought out of her head and instead soaked up Ezra’s utterly devastating face. How could she never have noticed how sensual the bow of a man’s upper lip could be? She swept across his mouth with her eyes.

“Tell me everything,” she said dreamily. “Were you at Studio 54 when Bianca Jagger rode in on that white horse? Where were you when MLK died?”

Ezra rolled over onto his back, tucking his hand behind his head. “I never went to Studio 54. I wasn’t a disco guy. In the ’70s, I was in London, jamming with British Jamaican reggae bands. I wasn’t in the mood for nightlife; nothing felt new. The ’20s was wilder than the ’70s.” He paused, chewing on his bottom lip. “Hmm. When Dr. King died, I found out on the car radio. I was driving my VW Bug to the Westbury Music Festival. I slammed the brakes, hard, and damn near broke my nose.” He closed his eyes, furrowing his brow a little. “I think Nina Simone dedicated her set to him at the fair. But that show’s a blur.”

“Because of the trauma?”

“No, ’cause I dropped acid,” he said. “I remember I’d just seen *Planet of the Apes*. The original one, with terrible 1968 special effects. And now I’m standing in this big ole crowd; people are mourning, singing, dancing—but I’m tripping something *terrible*. My brain was stuck on the visual of apes riding horses.”

“Honestly, that’s an image from hell.”
“Point being, folks are still folks, no matter what’s going on. You don’t

perceive history as it's happening."

Ricki nodded. "One time, I asked Ms. Della what it was like to live through World War II, and she said her most vivid memory was the nighttime, when everything was quieter, and she was alone in her bed, worrying if Dr. Bennett would come home alive. Even during the biggest thing in the world, it's about the smaller moment."

"You should know how that goes. You've lived through history, too." "Have I? I guess I have. Obama. Katrina. The crash of '08." She paused.

"106 & Park."

Ezra laughed and then paused, mulling this over. "Actually, I'll allow it.

Now it's my turn. I got a few questions." "Go."

"What's been your favorite moment? Of all time."

Her eyes met his, sparkling and utterly unguarded. "Other than this one?"

Ezra's gaze somehow both softened and caught fire. Drinking her in, he rested his large palm on her cheek, lightly running his thumb along her bottom lip. A languid wave of heat rippled through her. Ricki's tongue lightly touched his thumb, and his expression flared into something primal.

As if burned, Ezra snatched his hand back.

"Sex break," he groaned, adjusting the massive bulge in his boxer briefs. "Jesus Christ. You're gonna kill me."

"Sex break, right." She sat up next to him and pressed her thighs together. Suddenly hyperaware of her toplessness, she grabbed Ezra's discarded T-shirt and slipped it on.

"My favorite moment," she murmured, thinking. "It was my sophomore year in college, back in 2014. I was studying abroad for a semester in Seville. I don't know how I got my dad to agree to it. I think he thought if he said yes to this one quote-unquote wild idea, I'd buckle down once I graduated. Anyway, I'd never been off on my own. One night, I went out to this nightclub, Club Catedral. It was smoky, loud, sexy. I'm sitting at the bar, nursing a sangria,

all by myself. I couldn’t speak conversational Spanish yet, so there was no pressure to socialize. So I just watched. And I experienced all this life, this fucking gaiety, without the pressure to jump in. And I’d never felt so free. And it occurred to me then that no one back home knew where I was.

“I stayed till closing, around five a.m. As I’m walking home along these narrow, winding thousand-year-old cobblestone roads, I was hit with the most intoxicating scent. I followed it, till I found this tiny, hidden square surrounded by these fragrant bushes.” Ricki glanced at Ezra.

“Night-blooming jasmine?” His face lit up with delight.

Ricki grinned. “I’d never seen them in real life. Just in botanical photographs in coffee-table books at our local library. Growing up, I was obsessed with the idea of this unsuspecting bush unleashing all this secret beauty only at night… but meanwhile, no one who saw it during the day could fathom its power. Quite the metaphor for hidden potential,” she noted. “I fell asleep in the grass.”

“Sounds euphoric,” he said, bewitched.

“It was. Till I was awoken by the Policía Nacional. They charged me with drunken vagrancy and dragged me to the station. I was sent home from the program,” she said with a rueful chuckle. “The Seville thing became my parents’ favorite piece of evidence proving that I was an unfit human. But I didn’t feel ashamed, or even sorry. I felt alive. And ever since, I’ve held on to that memory of freedom, waiting for the day I’d feel it again. The ironic thing is, I feel it now. Despite what’s waiting for us.”

“I feel it, too,” he said quietly.

He didn’t tell her what he wanted to say, which was *This is all my fault; I ruined you. How in the everlasting fuck do I live without you? More of me belongs to you than doesn’t…*

But Ezra didn’t go there, because they’d agreed they couldn’t. So he kept asking her interview questions—favorite movie, favorite place, worst thing she’d ever done, best meal she’d ever had—because Ricki was the most entertaining person he’d ever known, and he had the best seat in the house. And it drowned out their existential terror.

She told him all the stories she could think of until she got drowsy and drifted off into hazy midmorning sleep. Ezra was wide awake. Ricki didn’t know it, but he’d barely

slept in days. He couldn’t, because he was keeping watch. He kept his eyes on her whenever she slept. He searched for anything out of the ordinary—her breath slowing down or her heart beating erratically. How could he find rest while she was in peril?

Ricki was curled into him, holding his hand tucked under her chin. The world around them fell still; his fingers twirled into her lush cloud of coils

as his mind drifted in and out of a zillion pointless rescue scenarios.

Ezra studied her sleeping face. Her breathing had started to speed up. Her brow furrowed, but her face looked relaxed. He heard her emit a soft, melodious sound. Was she humming? She sighed contentedly. Let out a soft whimper. And started humming again. Then he recognized it.

It was their song. Her song. The one he'd been writing for her forever.

Lost in some dream, she rolled onto her back. She whimpered again and then gasped, her back arching. Her nipples rose to points under the flimsy fabric of her T-shirt. Ezra drank her in, mesmerized and instantly, inconveniently hard.

Brow tensed, her tongue darted over her lips and she moaned a little. She hummed again, her hands running down the front of her body and between her thighs. Biting her bottom lip, she grinded against them, breathing out a shaky "*Fuu-uck me*."

Ezra was helpless to do anything but watch, his eyes wide. Dick throbbing. Mouth dry. Hands itching to manhandle her in several unlawful ways.

But then her eyes flew open. In a split second, she realized what was happening, and she clapped her palm over her mouth.

"Wait. Noooo!" She wail-laughed, hiding her face in her hands. "Oh my God… tell me you weren't watching…"

"That good?" He smirked, loving this.

"I feel so exposed!" She dropped her hands and peered at him, her cheeks sleep-creased and flushed. "Ugh, what did I say? Did I look crazy?"

He fixed her with adoring eyes. "If there's another sight worth seeing, I don't know what it is. And I've seen everything."

Before she could respond, he scooped Ricki into a heated kiss. Everything about Ezra was so unruffled and easy, until he kissed her. Then he went torrid. Plunging his hand into her hair, he tugged her head back and positioned her how

he wanted her, sucking her tongue into his mouth, practically devouring her as he drew his knee up between her legs. She moaned, grinding against his thigh. He kept at it, kissing her deeply, but slower now, bringing her back down to earth. Lightly, he nipped her bottom lip and drew back a little, just enough to tease her with closeness.

"Who was in your dream?" demanded Ezra, a wicked quirk to his mouth. The timbre of his voice was lust blown, filthy. He pressed further,

her heat scorching his skin. She was pinned to the bed, at his mercy. “You,” she breathed. “Only you could do this to me.”

He held his hand over her heart. It was pounding.

“For me?” Eyes glazed, she nodded.

He slipped his hand into her panties, cupping the heat of her. “For me?” Gasping, she nodded.

His lips brushed hers. “Prove it.”

Ricki looked up at him. Before he knew it, she’d ripped off his boxer briefs and was straddling his thighs, his dick huge in her hand. With an impatient growl, he ran his hands up under her shirt, cupping her breasts.

Bottom lip caught between her teeth, she positioned herself above him and lowered down till she was flush against his lap. They both groaned through gritted teeth.

Sex break, over.

“In my dream, it was just us two,” she panted out, her palms flat against the corrugated muscles of his belly, rolling her hips excruciatingly slow. “Just us, in the woods together, back home. We were like this in the dream. I was doing this to you.”

Leaning forward against his chest, she lifted herself up to the tip and then sank back down, over and over, taking him unfathomably deep until he moaned openly and uncontrollably, his fingers bruising the soft flesh of her hips.

“And all around us was our song. My song. I don’t know… where it was coming from, but it was perfect, and all around us, and I knew then… I knew…” Ricki lost her words then, because Ezra dragged his hand down to her center, rubbing his thumb over her clit in slow circles. She shuddered and cried out, the friction driving her insane.

“What did you know?” he rasped, barely holding on.

“I… I knew I could listen to it forever. I knew *you* were music I could listen to forever.”

The cresting simmer of arousal was unbearable now. And that was the thing about closeness, about being in sync, because then Ezra and Ricki dissolved into each other, moving together with instinctual fluidity.

He flipped her onto her back. In one fluid, decisive motion, he doubled her up and thrust into her. It was so good, Ricki blanked out for a moment, muffling her cries against Ezra’s neck. He kept at it until they broke—too

soon and almost simultaneously. They gripped each other in an airtight embrace as dizzying cascades of pleasure crashed over them.

Nothing had ever felt so exquisite. Fucking nothing.

Slowly, they floated back to earth, lost in a languid haze of lips and tongues and hands brushing against hot, sweaty skin. And Ricki realized it was always like this with Ezra. End-of-the-world sex. Catastrophe sex. High-stakes sex. They'd never have the chance to have everyday sex, like a long-term couple who'd been in love for ages. Sweet, paint-by-numbers sex on one of their birthdays, because it was expected. A fumbling "this'll do" quickie cut short by a kid toddling into the room. That normalcy would never happen for them.

She wept then. Silently at first, and then full-bodied, racking, grieving sobs. Ezra gathered her in his arms, sealing her to him as she grieved for a love story stopped short and a life that had never belonged to her at all.

"Thanks for calling me back. This story is going live at four p.m., so you caught me just in time," gushed Clementine Rhodes over Zoom. She was an entry-level reporter for *New York* magazine's The Cut. "Dying to hear more about Wilde Things. Your floral designs have literally taken over Harlem."

It was now hours later, around 1:00 p.m., and Ricki and Ezra were still in bed. Too lost in the drama of her life, Ricki had only recently noticed that her DMs were flooded with reporters trying to contact her about her Harlem nostalgia floral pop-ups. Her heart leapt at the recognition of her work, but her first instinct was to ignore it. What was the point of doing an interview now? Why spend time engaging a stranger while her fate hung in the balance?

But Ezra, peering over her shoulder at the gushing comments, encouraged her to call at least one reporter back. No one knew more than him the importance of legacy, what it meant to leave a mark.

"Living in the world's tough right now, don't you think?"

Ricki asked Clementine, balancing the laptop on her knees. She'd thrown on some powder, gloss, and a cute top, effectively masking her postcoital haze for Zoom. "The healing power of nature is real! My goal was to celebrate Harlem's hidden history and to brighten anyone's day who walked by them. But the community that's risen around it, of people taking the flowers and

decorating their own neighborhoods with them—it's an honor. It's my way of leaving a small mark."

"Love that. Community building is so important," agreed Clementine. "So, uh, I read this statistic that less than two percent of all floral designers are Black. Crazy. How does it feel to be a Black-owned floral shop in a white-dominated industry?"

"It's true; we're underrepresented in the industry. But look at Justina Blakeney—her Jungalow line is in Target. Hilton Carter's a magician with green interiors. All over the country, brilliant Black florists are breaking barriers: Andra Collins in Texas, Nikeema Lee in South Carolina, Breigh Jones-Coplin in Denver. Write-ups like yours can only help spread the word."

"Yes!" On the screen, Ricki watched the reporter nod while clicking keys. "I heard you did wedding florals for quite the elite couple. You must really feel like you've made it now."

"The wedding was so chic. And I'm forever grateful to George and Daniel for the opportunity. They were dream clients, but I don't believe that because certain people hire you, you've 'made it.' It's just as meaningful to me, if not more, that my community has discovered Wilde Things."

Clementine chewed her lip, tapping a fingernail against her chin. She wasn't satisfied. "Sorry to ask again, but is there anything you can say about the hardships of being a Black florist? My editor really wants a diversity quote." She rolled her eyes. "Gen X. You know they need to feel progressive."

"Girl, I get it. But there is no singular 'Black florist' experience. We have varied backgrounds, expertise, influence. And there's beauty in our diversity. The industry can be racist, of course. Do we get the same funding, gigs, press, or access that white florists do? No, but that's about white supremacist systems. Blackness itself isn't limiting; it's limitless." And then she added, "For inspo, though, I'd recommend *Black Flora* by Teresa Speight to your readers. Great read."

Ezra, propped up next to her against the headboard,

reading *Flower Color Guide*, a coffee-table book from Ricki's personal library, couldn't help but overhear the conversation. He was awestruck. It was all he could do not to hop on the bed and whoop for Ricki. In the past few days, he'd made it through almost all her plant books and binged half of *The Big*

Flower Fight on Netflix while Ricki slept.

As he listened, he shimmered with pride. Ricki was able to say all the things he couldn't to a reporter back in 1928: that Blackness wasn't a concept, an idea for sale. *There is no correlation between our value and white people buying in. Fuck, yes.*

Ricki was who he'd always wanted to be.

"Speaking of diverse backgrounds," the journalist said, "I heard it through the grapevine that you have Mexican ancestry?"

Ricki's jaw dropped, and Ezra swallowed a guffaw. Her mistaken identity fumble at that networking event was one of his favorite Ricki-isms. It was so endearingly absurd.

As she tried to explain the mix-up, Ezra's shoulders shook with silent laughter and Ricki struggled mightily to keep a straight face. In that fizzy, light moment, they were finally a regular couple. And they were happy. For that moment, they were happy.

A few hours later, Clementine's article, "Where the Wilde Things Are," went live. It quickly hit the top of the "Most Popular" list on The Cut and would eventually be circulated widely by Harlemites, floral designers, FlowerTok, Plantstagram, and a healthy percentage of Georgia State's 2017 liberal arts graduates.

But that evening, the piece reached one of *New York* magazine's most devoted digital followers, Rashida Wilde.

Several states south, she was sitting with her sisters, Regina and Rae, at South City Kitchen in Buckhead, Atlanta. She'd called an emergency dinner to discuss. Their three nearly identical heads were pressed together, peering down at Rashida's phone, open to "Where the Wilde Things Are," with intense focus. None of them could believe that their wayward, messy baby sister was experiencing this level of success with her ill-advised, impulsive little flower shop.

“I just don’t understand it, y’all.” Rashida was too shocked to take one more bite of her Local Peach Salad. “How did she pull this off?”

“A goddamned mystery,” breathed Regina.

“Scroll up,” demanded Rae. “See that pic of Ricki with her so-called flower shower? Was that really her idea? She must have a publicist. *How can she afford a publicist?*”

Stressed, Rashida dropped the phone into her purse. The three women sat back in their seats, silently pushing their food around on their plates. Their bold-shouldered YSL blazers seemed to deflate.

“We need to go up there,” said Regina.

“Tomorrow,” cosigned Rashida and

Rae.

Their plane tickets were booked before the check came.

CHAPTER 21

THE WITCHES OF EASTWICK

February 26, 2024

A Lululemon-clad redhead pushing a designer stroller swept into Wilde Things. Her eye was drawn to the casually sharp gentleman in gray jeans and a denim utility shirt, lifting a tropical bouquet onto a high shelf. He had an… important air about him. She made her way over.

"Hi! Do you work here?" she whispered, so as not to wake her baby. "Morning, ma'am. Yes, I'm director of first impressions. How may I be of service?"

"Well, you make quite a first impression." She winked. Ezra stuffed his hands in his pockets and smiled bashfully.

"I'm looking for a plant to give my place a kick. I don't get a lot of light, though."

"I see." Thinking, he scratched the side of his jaw and cocked his head. "How about a low-light flowering plant? Like begonias or African lilies. They can grow anywhere, I've heard tell. Just make sure they get at least eight hours of artificial light daily."

The redhead beamed, satisfied. She left with a great bundle of African lilies and a tiny parlor palm plant for her baby's nursery (the tall hottie with the Tupac lashes assured her it would help purify the air).

From the outside, things looked perfect. It was a clear, sunny day, and the shop was, if not packed, definitely almost bustling. Ricki mingled with

her clients, looking cute in a full ’50s tulle skirt, a clingy tee reading BUY BLACK, and Capezio ballet flats. She looked calm enough. That is, if you didn’t notice the dark bags under her eyes. Or the worried pinch to her brow. Or the fact that Ezra was nursing a similar pained look under his courteous, helpful smiles.

Across the room, their haunted eyes locked on each other. The air crackled with the intensity of their longing. They’d been like this all day, veering between panicked melancholy and an electric ache. They had three days left. Time was winding down, as steady as the final remaining sands through an hourglass. Reality had set in.

And the only comfort they felt was when they were no more than five inches apart.

But it was impossible for Ricki and Ezra to be together constantly. Ricki wept in silence in the shower. Ezra returned from grocery runs with his eyes hollow and his mouth drawn. Following these quiet, devastating moments, they’d run to each other—grasping and dizzy with need—with nothing left to say.

Ricki *did* have things to say to Ms. Della. But Ms. Della had utterly iced her out. Ricki was at a loss. She’d slipped letters under her door. She’d left voicemails and floral arrangements, baked cookies and cakes. She spotted Naaz coming and going less frequently and wondered if she’d moved in with Ms. Della to provide around-the-clock care. Her health was clearly declining, and it gutted Ricki. Who’d care for Ms. Della after she was gone? She’d been in the older woman’s life for such a short time, but they were family. At this moment especially, Ricki missed Ms. Della’s no- nonsense outlook, the gentle arm pats, the comforting cups of tea. Ricki needed to reconcile with her.

While Ricki was wrestling with these thoughts at her workstation, Ezra was pulled away from his current customer by Tuesday, who’d just rushed into the shop out of nowhere.

“Sorry to bust in on your sale, but I really owe you an apology,” said Tuesday as she led him to the emerald

throne in the far corner. Her face was barely visible behind a snapback.

"What for?" Ezra wasn't sure *which* thing she was apologizing for.

Breaking into his house, maybe?

“I hate the way I acted at that wedding. Trying to fight you and all. Old habits die hard.”

“No need to apologize.” Ezra

meant it. “Seriously?”

He shrugged lightheartedly. “You were looking out for your friend. It’s honorable.”

“Here’s the thing about me. In general, I feel like men are guilty until proven innocent. I know it’s problematic, but…” She let out a defeatist exhale. “Look, I’m still healing, okay?”

“We’re all healing from something,” he said, his voice filled with understanding. He leaned against the wall. “Say no more.”

“Also,” Tuesday continued, “in my defense, you acted scary.” Lowering her brim, she whispered, “The way you kept quote-unquote running into Ricki? How was I supposed to know you two were magical soulmates rendered helpless to the involuntary gravitational pull of love?”

“If you’d guessed that, you’d be the scary one.”

“I don’t think for a second that you two are in real trouble. Curse or no curse,” said Tuesday with a dismissive wave. Ricki had been trying to say a permanent goodbye to her for days, but she refused to allow it. “Light overpowers dark. And love conquers all.”

“That’s what they say,” he said ruefully. He could barely stand to hear it said out loud. He was too old to believe in slogans.

“Anyway, I wanted to let you know that I’m not an asshole, Ezra. I’m just protective.”

He chuckled at this. It was clear to Ezra why Ricki was drawn to Tuesday. This woman was a force of nature. “I knew I was just seeing one side of you. I could always tell by your performance on *Ready Freddy* that you’re multifaceted. Creativity bends; it contorts.”

“Hold on.” She took a step back and pointed at him. “You watched my show?”

“I never missed an episode!” he said passionately. “I’ve been a TV junkie since the birth of the art form.”

“I keep forgetting you’re an old person.” She shook her head, marveling. “It’s so *Freaky Friday*. I can’t.”

“You brought such depth to your character. I loved the episode when you auditioned for cheerleading but forgot the routine and ran offstage to the

bathroom…”

“And sat on the toilet, crying, and when I stood up, the audience saw the bottom of my skirt had fallen in the toilet.”

“You played it for laughs, but it broke my heart. Your talent’s plumb astounding.”

Slowly, Tuesday’s face brightened under her hat. She rarely heard anything positive about her acting—it was always about her looks, her sexy figure.

She caught herself going soft and rolled her eyes. “That’s a lie from the pit of hell.”

“It’s no lie,” he said. “Lately, I’ve been watching these floral design competition shows, just to understand Ricki’s business. And I learned that moss can hold up to four times its weight in water. Your performances were like that. You were so young, but the emotional weight you took on was greater than your years.”

This time, she allowed her delight to show. She flashed a dazzling smile. “Aw, you just wanted to drop your lil’ moss fact.”

He grinned. “That obvious, huh?”

“You love Ricki. That’s what’s obvious.”

Ezra glanced again at Ricki. “I love her too much.”

“No such thing,” said Tuesday. “Hey. So, uh, not to change the subject, but I’m writing this memoir. It’s so hard. I *hate* it, actually. But that was a great line, about my emotional depth. Can you repeat exactly what you said, so I can catch it on my voice recorder app?”

Ezra laughed. “Sure. But why write the memoir if you hate it?”

“To set the record straight about everything I went through in Hollywood. To tell my side of the story. But the deeper I get into it, the less I feel like I owe the world an explanation for a single fucking thing.”

“I reckon you don’t. If you could do anything else besides write it, what would you do?”

“Open a medi-spa,” she blurted out, breathlessly and without hesitation. “A medi-spa! All right, now.” After a beat, Ezra asked, “And what is

that?”

“A medical spa, with aestheticians to provide dermatological procedures. Lasers, facials, steams, Botox, dermaplaning. *A* through *Z*.”

“Oh, clearly you’ve thought about this.”

“I’m obsessed with skincare. I *dream* of complexion perfection. By the way, you’re virtually poreless. Kiehl’s?”

“Curse,” he said with a wink. “Tuesday, forget the memoir. You just lit up talking about this spa. Make yourself happy. Open your business.”

She beamed, radiating nervous excitement. And then it abated. “But I was really leaning into being a memoirist.”

“Maybe you *were* a memoirist.” Ezra shrugged. “But identity changes all the time, I’ve found. There’s a few more 'yous’ you haven’t met yet.”

Tuesday took this in. Then she leaned in and hugged Ezra. She waved to Ricki and bounced out of the shop, excited to begin researching her new endeavor. As he watched her leave, Ezra realized that was the first non-Ricki hug he didn’t hate.

He liked it, actually. Growth had funny timing.

Steadily, the crowd thinned as the day went on. By 5:45 p.m., the last customers left the shop with an armful of delphiniums and snowdrops. Ezra locked the door behind the couple and then drew the blinds, but not before stamping their punch card and offering a courtly “Y’all come back, now.” It was his third night of closing. He was practically an expert.

As soon as the door shut, Ricki sank against her workstation table, depleted. She grabbed a plastic flute of prosecco from the table (she always offered wine to her customers after 4:00 p.m.). With a beleaguered sigh, she downed one flute and then grabbed another.

It took a physical toll, the effort to seem so la-di-da, business-as-usual for eight entire hours. Ezra could relate.

He stood with his back to the door, watching her in the shadows. Ricki looked up, meeting his eyes. There was nothing left to say.

Within two heartbeats, Ezra was in front of her, comfortingly large. He rested his forehead against hers.

His touch was a relief, an exhale. She let out a small sound of surrender.

He bent down, sliding his strong arm around her lower back. She wrapped her legs around his waist, and he picked her up. They melted into a

ravenous, possessive kiss, a desperate blur of hands, tongues, teeth. Hungrily, he tore off her T-shirt. As she trailed kisses down his throat, he grabbed the bottle of prosecco, taking a lusty swig. With a low growl, he kissed it into her mouth, liquid trickling down her chest, dampening the filmy lace of her bra. Ezra ran his tongue up her neck, making her shudder. Gasping, Ricki arched her back, clawing at his shoulders. Then they were kissing again with delicious urgency. Ezra hiked up the diaphanous layers of her skirt, and then—

Brrriiiing! It was the Wilde Things doorbell. They froze, two pre-orgasmic deer in headlights. "Maybe they'll go away," he rasped.

The bell rang again. And then there was an urgent pounding on the door. "Who could that be?" hissed Ricki.

They disentangled themselves from each other. Ezra hurried to the bathroom as Ricki straightened her skirt, threw on her T-shirt, and rushed to the front door on extremely wobbly legs. So annoying, but actually it was five minutes to closing—Wilde Things was technically still open.

Pasting on a customer-service-ready smile, Ricki flung open the door.

And let out a bloodcurdling yelp.

Almost instantly, Ezra came flying back into the shop, shirtless and brandishing a candlestick.

The three women standing in the doorway gasped. They all had the forty-something version of Ricki's face but were taller—over six feet in stilettos—and intimidating in their austere, monochromatic designer fashions. Individually, they would have been a force. But together, they were an impenetrable wall of icy glamour. Even if Ricki's sisters couldn't agree on the color of an orange, they certainly presented as a unit.

Ezra's eyes widened. And Ricki's squeezed shut.

This was not happening. No. There was too much going on. Ricki was three days from certain death, quietly withering under Ms. Della's silent treatment, and attempting to fuck her soulmate for one of the last times

ever. She couldn’t take this on! Why the hell were the Witches of Eastwick at her shop?

Ezra just stood there in his bare-chested glory, his face registering awe and panic.

“What,” started Ricki, “the absolute fuck are y’all doing here?”

“We were in town for business, and we wanted to see your shop. And you.” Rashida then pointed at Ezra without taking her eyes off Ricki. “Are you aware there’s a shirtless himbo wielding a lethal weapon behind you? What kind of establishment are you running here?”

Delighted judgment flickered in Rashidaginarae’s eyes. Ricki was all too familiar with this look. Wearily, she gestured at Ezra to come over. With a winning smile, Ezra placed the candlestick on the table and joined Ricki at the door.

“He isn’t a himbo; he’s my boyfriend.” “Boyfriend” was too slight a word, but she was too emotionally frazzled to think of another. “Ezra, meet my sisters, Alvin, Simon, and Theodore.”

“Ricki, I swear to God.”

“Sorry. Ezra, this is Rashida, Regina, and Rae.”

“Pleasure’s mine,” he said jovially, shaking each of their hands and trying to approximate some level of normality. “Come on in out the cold.”

“No, stay in the cold,” intercepted Ricki, holding up her hand to stop them. “Tell me why you’re here.”

“Why so suspicious?” asked Regina, who was holding up her iPhone and snapping pics with the demented urgency of a fan who’d later sell the pics to TMZ. Ricki tried to grab it, but Regina dodged her.

“We wanted to see you! And your shop.” Rae peered behind Ricki. “It’s… eclectic. And wow, *so* much greenery.”

“Like a cosmopolitan Rainforest Cafe,” added Rashida.

Ricki glared at her. “Well, we’re closed. There’s nothing to see here.”

Rashida adjusted her Louis Vuitton Speedy bag on her shoulder. “Are you really going to turn away your flesh and blood after we traveled economy class to visit our baby sister?”

“Also, I’m starving,” announced Regina, pursing her lips and finally lowering her phone.

Ricki and Ezra looked at each other. These women were not budging. And just like that, Ricki slipped into an old habit. Being around her family turned her back into that

sixteen-year-old who wanted so desperately to please them. To be accepted, to be validated. Even though she always came up short, she always tried.

"Fine. Do you… um… How about we go to dinner? Le Bernardin or Jean-Georges? They're legendary New York City restaurants. Michelin

stars, very elite."

"Oh, spare us. New York's culinary scene is no chicer than Atlanta's," Rashida said with a sigh. "You've lived here for five minutes—calm down. And by the way, your shirt's on inside out."

With that, the sisters pushed past Ricki and Ezra and stormed into the shop, wandering around and touching everything.

"We don't want to go to a restaurant; we want to see *your* place," said Rae. "Invite us over for dinner! Where do you live?"

"I live… here," said Ricki quietly.

"In your shop?" Rae was horrified. "This is worse than we thought." "No! Behind the shop, behind that back door. But it's so small, I don't think…"

Ricki's stomach sank. She wasn't prepared for her sisters to see her extremely humble private sanctuary. She shared a quick, furtive glance with Ezra. And his eyes were so open and welcoming, she almost burst into tears. *For as much time as we have*, he'd said to her that morning, *I've got you*.

He calmed her down just with one look, automatically understanding the stress and anxiety her sisters brought her. And he'd take care of it. He took care of everything.

"I have an idea," said Ezra. "Why don't I make y'all dinner?" "Where?" asked Ricki, Rashida, Regina, and Rae.

"Here," he told them. "I'm an excellent cook. Where are you staying?" "The Wallace Hotel," answered the eldest sister.

"That's just a fifteen-minute ride down Amsterdam. Tell you what, if you go back there for a couple hours, it'll give me time to grab some groceries and get it ready. Uber's on me, round trip."

Ricki understood that he was also buying her time to emotionally prep. "I'll make y'all dinner and then I'll go home," continued Ezra, "so you can catch up."

The three older sisters mulled this over. They were visibly shocked that Ricki was dating a person with actual practical real-life skills. And this was far too interesting a situation for him to go home early.

“But we don’t want you to go home after,” purred Regina, with all the sincerity of the Cheshire Cat. “We want to get to know you better.”

He quickly looked at Ricki, whose eyes were pleading.

“I’ll stay.”

Three hours later, they were all sitting around Ricki’s stoop-sale coffee table on the rickety stools she’d refurbished and hand-painted. Her sisters were in high-judgment mode. Rashida kept asking “Where’s the rest of it?” while Rae marveled at her ability to maximize a space “the size of a Nissan Sentra.” Regina glared at the radiator every time it hissed and clanged.

While her sisters hung out at the Wallace, Ezra had gone food shopping and Ricki had cleaned her studio. She felt like sex was all over her apartment: in the rumpled, rainy-day sheets, the coffee mugs on the nightstand, the pile of his clothes in her hamper. What was hers had quickly turned into theirs, and it was intimate, beautiful and sacred. Ricki didn’t want to share it with her sisters, who’d never understood her and didn’t want to. They thought she was a kooky slut with no impulse control.

By the time her sisters returned, the space was spotless. And Ezra had whipped up a delicious menu of shrimp purloo, Gullah red rice, and fried corn cake, ending with peaches-and-cream pie.

And she knew, without them explicitly saying so, that her sisters were impressed. She could tell by the way they’d stopped being so judgy and they could talk only about the food.

Not that I care, Ricki reminded herself.

“Frankly, I’m shocked,” said Regina, tapping a napkin to the corner of her mouth. “Given Ricki’s track record in the kitchen, I was expecting a variety pack of cereal boxes for dinner. Ezra, you’re a keeper.”

“Down-home delicious,” gushed Rae.

“What’s this vegetable I’m tasting?” asked Rashida, spooning the thick, rich soup.

“Okra,” said Ezra, visibly proud of his hastily prepared but delicious dinner. “My mom taught me how to cook. She was originally from Daufuskie Island, South Carolina. You know, real Low Country Gullah folk put okra in everything

down there.”

Rashida didn’t know anything about Low Country Gullah folk, so she offered a mild “Ah, yes” and continued to inhale the soup.

“Well, it’s so tasty,” said Rae. “You’re quite the cook, Ezra.”

“Oh, I’ve had these recipes for like a hundred years,” he said with a

smile. “I’ve had time to perfect them.”

“There’s no healthy way to eat like this,” said Regina, reaching for a piece of pie.

“My sister only eats dishes recommended by Gwyneth Paltrow,” said Ricki, relieved that Ezra had taken over. Her sisters’ presence not only was triggering but was taking up valuable time with Ezra—time that was disappearing. She felt nauseous every time she thought of it. Thank God Ezra had picked up their side of the conversation.

Such a luxury, she thought, *having someone who fills in your gaps when you’re depleted*.

“Sometimes food serves purely as a comfort,” Ezra pointed out. “Not just sustenance.”

Regina cocked a brow in his direction. “Wait till you turn forty, kid. It’s all fun and games until metabolism plays in your face.”

Rashida had had enough of this surface-level chitchat. “So, Ezra, tell us about yourself. Where’d you grow up? Where’d you go to school? What do you do?”

“Can we skip the interview?” Ricki turned toward her. “Isn’t it enough that he whipped up a five-star dinner for you in, like, five seconds?”

Ricki sounded and felt like a petulant teenager, and she knew it.

“It’s all right, Ricki,” he said mildly, squeezing her knee under the table. As always, he was cool as a breeze. “You can ask me anything. I’m from South Carolina. A little town called Fallon County—it doesn’t exist anymore, though. My parents and my sister were all sharecroppers.”

The sisters eyed each other.

“Sharecroppers?” Rae said, bristling. “That sounds so Jim Crow. Is sharecropping even legal anymore?”

“Girl, who knows what goes on in the sticks,” said Rashida. “No, I meant farmers. They are… were… farmers.”

Not good. This always happened to Ezra when he was with Ricki: his guard came down and he told the truth.

“Ohhh,” cooed Regina, perking up. “Well! Farming can be extremely profitable. And Harvard, Johns Hopkins, and

Cornell have brilliant agricultural science degrees. My high school boyfriend was from an old pistachio-farming family in California and went to Harvard. Girls, remember Darryl Remsen?”

“He was so fine,” recalled Rae. “Peaked too soon, though. Somebody told me he got starter locs and left his churchy wife of twenty-five years for a masturbation consultant he met on OnlyFans.”

“I hadn’t heard that,” snapped Regina. “*Anyway.* All the top farming families know each other. Surely you’ve heard of the Remsens?”

“Well, my family wasn’t really like that. I come from a humble background,” said Ezra, pouring himself more wine and then filling up all the Wilde sisters’ mismatched glasses. “And they’re no longer with us.”

“Your whole family is dead?”

whispered Rashida. “Covid?” gasped

Regina.

“Not to pry, but what funeral home did you use?”

wondered Rae.

“Every time I think y’all have reached apex horrible, you raise the bar,” said Ricki, protective of Ezra.

“It’s all right; your sisters don’t mean any harm,” said Ezra amiably, even though Ricki’s sisters demonstrably meant harm. Ezra, who was so starved for a family of his own, who missed his sister, Minnie, every day of the world, couldn’t bring himself to be anything but kind to them. “Rashida, can I offer you more fried cakes?”

“Absolutely not. I need to stop eating; we have our cousin Brandy’s wedding in four months. Ricki, did you get your invitation?”

“Yeah, but I’ll probably be dead by then,” she muttered dryly, sipping her wine.

“I can’t for the life of me understand why she’s marrying a man who cleans grout and tiles for a living,” said Regina. “A Lithuanian man!”

“That Lithuanian man owns his own multimillion-dollar grout-and-tile cleaning *corporation*,” pointed out Rae. “And he looks like Chris Evans.”

“Chris Evans! A *man*,

honey.” “I’d marry him

tomorrow.”

“I know that’s right.”

Ricki rolled her eyes in Ezra’s direction, painfully aware that her sisters sounded like a pack of clucking chickens.

“But Brandy’s father and two brothers are Morehouse Alphas,” said Rashida. “Her great-aunt’s the national president of the Links. A Lithuanian husband is so off-brand.”

“It’s probably liberating as hell,” said Regina, finishing off her wine. “She can walk around with ashy ankles and unlaid edges and he’ll never

know.”

“Did you see the size of her rock? Ten and a half carats,” whispered Rae.

Rashida shrugged. “Way too big. Only a cheating man buys such ostentatious diamonds.”

Rae lowered her hand under the table, twisting her ring to the back.

Full and satisfied, Rashidaginarae kept on like this as the night grew later and later. Finally, around 11:00 p.m., the conversation wound down, and Ricki couldn’t have been more relieved. Time for them to go.

“Well, I have to say,” started Regina, “I’m impressed by Wilde Things, Ricki. When we read the *New York* magazine piece, we didn’t know what to think!”

“Imagine our surprise that you’d made such a prestigious digital publication,” said Rae. “I mean, this is the same girl who thought that a 401K was a gift of four hundred and one thousand dollars you get from the government upon retirement.”

“The same girl who thought buffalos had wings,” Rashida said, snickering.

“The same girl who got a ticket for parking in a no-standing zone, because she thought the sign meant you literally couldn’t stand there.”

All three sisters fell apart at that one, laughing loud and tipsily. Rashida banged her palm on the table, and Rae’s eyes spouted tears of mirth. Ezra watched them, deeply uncomfortable. Every instinct he had pushed him to defend her, but he also knew better than to insert himself into a family affair. He was the outsider here.

Ricki glowered, angry maroon blotches blooming on her cheeks. “Why do you keep bringing up mistakes I made forever ago? What do you get out of that?”

“Oh girl, relax,” giggled Rae airily. “You get so upset. Why can’t you take a joke?”

“Who’s joking? You’re dragging me, on purpose. And, by the way, I was a *baby* when I said the 401K thing.”

“You were
nineteen.” “I

was sheltered.”

“You still are. Which is why this Wilde Things success makes no sense.” “No offense, but you’re a disaster magnet. Don’t fault us for being shocked.”

Disaster magnet? That was when Ezra's reserve flew out the window.

Fuck manners.

"With all due respect," he said, crossing his arms over his chest, "I need to speak up. Ricki is a brilliant creative mind. She created this space from scratch. With clarity of vision, she executed this shop exactly how she saw it in her head. Much of it with her own two hands. Wilde Things is objectively beautiful, she's worked hard to make it financially viable, and she's created community around her art! Sounds to me like y'all are discounting her achievements because, were the situation reversed, you couldn't have done it yourselves."

Regina looked like she'd bitten into a grapefruit with the skin on. "You're a farmer, sweetheart."

Ezra's eyes blazed. "Actually, let's be clear—I'm a sharecropper. And I'm the proud son of sharecroppers Big Ezra and Hazel Walker, who raised me and my sister, Minnie, to be good people. Kind. Helpful. Generous. I don't have any education, and neither did they, but learning happens everywhere, if you listen. We don't all come from kings and queens, and we don't all make it to Harvard, and that's all right. Pardon my directness, but you oughta rethink your narrow idea of excellence. And while you're at it, rethink being the kind of folks who call on somebody unexpectedly and then insult them."

The room fell silent. Ricki gawked at Ezra, wide-eyed. First of all, no one ever dared to challenge her sisters (not even their husbands). Secondly, she'd never heard him talk like this. And thirdly, no one had ever stood up for her to her family.

"Ezra, it's okay…"

"Nah, it's not okay." Now he was really worked up. "And furthermore, what kind of Colored people never had okra? Ain't y'all from Georgia?"

"Colored?"

Ricki's sisters gasped at his outdated terminology. Heart thundering, Ricki quickly jumped in.

"He's right," she told them. "You're not going to insult

me in my own home. You know what? I fought my whole life to try to impress you three, to gain your approval, as if you're perfection personified. But you're two- dimensional paper dolls! I'm *relieved* not to be you."

Furious, Ricki pushed her stool back from the table.

“No, you’ve never made a public mistake or gotten a C in school or dated the wrong guy. But have you ever had an independent thought? Or taken a risk? Your sameness is maddening. Same charities, same art on your walls, same clothes, and the same bland-ass McHusbands who abandoned their own career ambitions to work for Dad. I don’t care if you approve of me. I’m proud of the beauty I brought to the world… even if it’s for a short time.” She glanced sadly at Ezra. “There isn’t one way to experience a life well lived. And I’m glad I chose my way.”

Rashida let out a long-suffering sigh and folded her napkin on the table. “Ricki. We’ve only ever wanted what’s best for you. And you’ve embarrassed us at every turn. Do you know what Daddy had to do to give us a privileged life? You should be grateful—”

Just then, Rae interrupted. “I used to dream of being a dentist. Why do you think I refresh my veneers every five years? It’s not because my smile isn’t perfect. It’s because I enjoy observing the sublime, sculptural craft of it!”

Ricki shrugged. “Well, why didn’t you go to dental school, then?” “*Because we’re not dentists!*” she shouted. “And family comes first!

Why should you get to run off and chase such a silly pursuit, when we couldn’t?”

And there it was. After all this time, Ricki saw things clearly. Her sisters were resentful because she had the balls to do exactly what she wanted. And she always had.

“Listen,” she said, her voice leveling. “Parents work hard so their kids can have choices. That’s true privilege, not being tied to a life you don’t want, out of necessity. Life’s too short. I could go at any time. Y’all may have regrets, but I don’t want any.”

“Ricki, sweetie. You are one of us. You can’t run from who you are.” “That may be true. But I *can* kick you out of my home.”

Her sisters were shocked. *Ricki* was shocked. She couldn’t believe she finally had the nerve to take a real stand against her sisters. She felt triumphant, almost dizzy with victory.

Rashidaginarae gathered their matching designer purses and marched toward the door in outrage, but not before Ezra—who did, in fact, regret butting into their argument—packed each sister a Saran-wrapped piece of pie.

Back home, the elder Wilde sisters reported to Richard Sr. and Carole that Ricki had lost her mind. That she was dating a suspiciously good- looking farmer and they were living in sin in the back of her store. Distressed, Carole took two Xanax and slept for eighteen hours.

But Richard sat there taking in the news with characteristic silence. After he'd dismissed his daughters, and Carole had vanished up to their bedroom, he stayed there sitting at the table, lost in thought. He was, in his own way, quietly, fiercely proud. And he had an idea.

CHAPTER 22

BURYING A GRUDGE

February 27, 2024

Della didn't like podcasts. Or at least, she didn't like the one she was currently being subjected to, which was also the only one she'd ever heard. Being lectured at by a stranger was no fun unless it was Joel Osteen or Oprah doing the talking.

She was resting on her chaise lounge, her chenille blanket pulled up to her chin. Naaz had put on the podcast for her, and the host's singsongy northern British accent softly lilted through the nurse's portable speaker. The series, called *Normalizing the Great Transition*, explored death rites from around the world.

In the past fifteen minutes, Della had learned that (1) Rastas avoid dead bodies because it makes them unclean; (2) the Malagasy people of Madagascar open up tombs every few years to dress up the corpses in new fashions; and (3) the Tinguian people of the Philippines sit their deceased in a chair, pop a lit cigarette in their mouth, and then party all around them.

That last one sounded like a good time, actually.

Della was waiting for Ricki and Ezra. She'd called Ricki this morning and invited them both to an early lunch. She'd needed some time since Ricki's last visit. It was a lot, being expected to believe these tall tales. But she missed her

granddaughter. The call must’ve startled Ricki half to death; the poor thing practically wailed in relief when she heard Della’s voice.

Della had put on her most luxurious silk pajamas and ordered from Sylvia's. The food was for Ricki and Ezra, of course. She hadn't had an appetite in days.

Della wasn't feeling like herself. Actually, that wasn't true; her *brain* was exactly the same as it had always been. Her inner voice was the same one that had spoken back to her at fifteen, twenty-nine, forty-two, and now ninety-six. It was her body that was beginning to feel foreign. Same product, unrecognizable packaging. Yes, she'd been elderly for a long while, and over time, she'd even started to enjoy the scent of the muscle- soothing Tiger Balm she massaged into her hands.

But lately, when she looked in the mirror, it seemed as though her face had acquired thirty more wrinkles. Her figure was so stooped, she couldn't stand up straight even when she tried. She was weakening, more and more.

Now she shuffled when she walked (well, when she felt like walking, which was rarely). Her left eye, cheek, and shoulder drooped a little. Her Zumba and water aerobics classes? Off the table. She hadn't joined her Links Elder Steppers Walking Club on their biweekly jaunts around the Upper West Side in almost a month, though she saw the girls yesterday when they stopped by with a vat of somebody's daughter's gumbo.

You know your lights are going out when folks start bringing you home- cooked meals, she thought.

In lieu of meaningful physical activity, Della beat off boredom by doing small-scale things, like dusting her Lladró figurines. Combining tea leaves to concoct new flavors. This morning, she wore a new Fashion Fair lipstick she'd read about in her *Essence* magazine subscription (Naaz had helped her paint it on with a lip brush). Della was determined to live as vibrant a life as she could until her last breath. Even if on some days, the most she could do was swipe on a dazzling lipstick.

Naaz had moved in to provide around-the-clock care, and her only job was to help Della feel as comfortable as possible in her final weeks or months or whatever. The "whatever" was the worst part. Della just wished she had a

say, some control. It seemed undignified, sitting around waiting for death to claim you. It seemed passive, meek. And she loathed not being in control. Everything else was okay. She wasn’t really in much pain, so she didn’t want to depend on the morphine. She just felt exhausted.

When the doctors told her that she needed around-the-clock palliative

care, her one request was knowing exactly where her pills were, and how many of them she was supposed to take and when. This dying business was infantilizing enough as it was; she didn't want to be at the mercy of Naaz for her pain management. She was a lovely girl, but *sweet fancy Moses*, sometimes her relentless cheeriness was like a screen door slamming in the wind.

Suyin had stopped by to make her a batch of terrible corn bread, which she pretended to adore. Last week, Della and Su had amicably ended their romance as they soared over Manhattan in an hourly rental helicopter she'd chartered (bucket list item number four completed!). Their breakup was both picturesque and unavoidable. Della was too tired to go on dates, and sometimes even too weak to sit up on the couch and watch their baking shows. But they maintained their friendship. Su loved to laugh and tell stories, and Della soaked it up. The days were so long now—she welcomed the company.

She needed Ricki's company, too. But until today, she couldn't face her. She hated that she'd iced Ricki out for days, but if she'd learned anything in her ninety-six years, it was that taking action before one was ready was unwise. When Ricki spun that yarn about Ezra, Felice, and the curse, she'd written it off as pure delirium. Clearly, Ricki had fallen hard for an unhinged man who'd sucked her into his fantasies. Wasn't that what she'd always said her family experienced with her? Perhaps Ricki was as nutty as her family had always alleged.

But Della knew that wasn't true. Ricki had flights of fancy, to be sure, but she was sane, sensible, reasonable. And she was *serious* about being taken seriously, in life and in business. No person so red hot on being seen as capable would come up with a story so ludicrous. And yet it was ludicrous, of course. It was.

It isn't, thought Della. *You know you always heard whispers about Mama. How many schoolyard scrapes did you win, fighting the daughters of ladies who'd grown up with her?*

Unholy conjure woman, they'd said. *Loose morals. Born*

with a caul, hot from hell. Heard tell she put the roots on my mama, for letting her beau walk her to Broussard's Dry Goods. Hexed my aunt for laughing at her burlap dress. Laid with any fella who paid her mind. Spent more time playin' than prayin'. Be careful who you take a shine to, Della—might be

your brother.

Whenever Della came home with scraped knees after defending Mama in another tussle, she'd beg Nana for the truth. But she would refuse to confirm or deny. Nana barely spoke two words about her gone-too-soon daughter. Instead, she'd thread her old rosary through her fingers, solemnly praying over the beads. Della always wondered what she was praying for. Felice's soul? Della's? Her own? Or maybe she was simply grieving.

As she grew into a teenager, Della tried to see it from her grandmother's perspective. Nana was religious in the extreme, and the only man she'd ever loved had abandoned her before marriage, leaving their daughter a bastard. And when Felice grew up to be "fast"—and, by all accounts, a witch, no less—she ran off to pursue Harlem's devilish delights, leaving behind a baby daughter. Yet another bastard baby for Nana to raise. Another failure in the eyes of the Lord. And then Felice's suicide. The ultimate failure.

The Fabienne women were wired to be sad. Nana got the blues, the kind that kept her in bed for weeks at a time. Sounded like Felice was the same way. Made sense, because Della was, too. And the blues took forever to abate. Della was familiar with how… hopeless it felt to live in fear of your own emotions. Flattened by their strength.

Whatever emotional ailment she and Nana had, it sounded like Felice had it worse. But instead of sticking it out, she'd abandoned her daughter, left her alone to defend Felice's honor and reckon for her alleged sins. The weight of Felice's reputation was stifling, and because of it, Della's childhood was miserable. And she wasn't just angry about it. She hated Felice for it. It was a grudge she carried around with her every day.

Yes, Ricki's story about Ezra's curse was unreasonable. Crazy talk. But the truth was, Della had always felt that there was something explosive about Felice. The suspicion that those schoolyard rumors were true lurked in her mind: unproven but powerful. It was in Nana's absolute refusal to discuss her daughter; the small-town stories turned into myths that outlived her mother's short life; the mystery

surrounding her suicide.

Della had lost seven babies to late-term miscarriages, and she could feel the emptiness in her womb long after they were gone. With each loss, she'd had to wonder: Had Nana felt it when Felice jumped off the roof? Had she felt that same eternal hollowness? Could a mother's body perceive the loss, no matter how old her baby was, or how far away? Was it a messy,

unwieldy grief, or as neat and clean as a bullet hole? And was it more harrowing to lose a child than to lose a mother too soon?

As far back as she could remember, Della had searched for her mom everywhere. In her friends' mothers' faces, in her teachers, in Ethel Waters's movies. What would it have been like to know her scent, her laugh, her voice? The trajectory of her life would surely have been different. She may not have met Dr. Bennett at that Christmas church social when he was just a young college student visiting his cousins on the bayou. Della had gone to that damned social to spite the popular girls in town, who'd always said she was "witch spawn" and had no business stepping foot in the Lord's house. If she'd known her mother—if she hadn't had that chip on her shoulder—maybe she wouldn't have been so hot on proving those wenches wrong.

But she'd never know. There was so much she didn't know. Wasn't that why she'd bought 225½ West 137th Street? To absorb Felice's energy, try to understand her better, and hopefully get some answers?

And yet, she thought, *when Ricki came to me with answers, I turned her away*.

Della didn't want to believe Ricki's story, because it sounded like the truth.

There were a few short knocks on the door.

"Hiii! Ricki! Long time no see! What's it been, five days? A week? And you must be Ezra…"

Naaz's bell-like voice rang out throughout the house. Della's stomach flip-flopped at the sound of his name. Before, Ezra was simply Ricki's crush, fling, love, but now, if he was who he said he was, he was also the last person to see her mother alive.

She was propped up on pillows on her velvet chaise lounge when Naaz came bounding into the living room. "Ms. Della, your visitors are here…"

Ricki entered the room, followed by Ezra. The moment she saw Della, she froze. Her bright smile fell and she

stood there, caught in a stare of surprise.

Lord, thought Della, *do I really look that peaked?*

After a beat, she dropped Ezra's hand and rushed over to her. Gently,

Ricki pulled her tiny, stooped shoulders into an embrace. And then, with great effort, Della raised her arms and hugged her back.

“Ms. Della, I’m so sorry. I’m so sorry for everything. I know you’re angry with me; I know everything I told you sounds insane. And I never wanted to hurt you. But I had to tell you. I couldn’t go… without telling you Ezra’s story, the curse, all of it. It wasn’t my place to speak to you about Felice. I shouldn’t have even said her name.”

She blurted this out, barely pausing to take a breath.

“It’s all right, baby. I know, I know.” Della quickly patted her on the back twice, signifying that the hug was over. Breathing was difficult, and Ricki was cutting off her air supply. With one final squeeze, Ricki stood back up. Her granddaughter looked lovely in a puff-sleeve maxidress that Della had made for herself fifty years before. The handmade hand-me-down had been her Christmas gift to Ricki, who’d been so touched when she’d opened it that she’d burst into tears.

“I’m sorry for being unreachable, sugar,” continued Della. “I just needed to sit with myself for a moment. You understand,” she said, and it wasn’t a question.

Della peered past Ricki and saw that Ezra was standing across the room at a respectful distance. One hand jammed in his pocket, his expression unreadable. She hadn’t seen him since she and Ricki inexplicably ran into him at a bodega a few weeks ago, and she could barely remember what he looked like. If Ricki hadn’t left so many messages and letters mentioning him, she wasn’t sure she’d remember him at all. Which was especially curious after seeing him. This was not a forgettable man. His was not a forgettable face.

Is it one worth dying over? she wondered. *Mama thought so. But that isn’t fair, is it? Felice’s troubles started long before she met him.*

Della was so lost in thought that she didn’t see Ezra was holding a bouquet of sunflowers and yellow roses until Naaz took them and went to find a vase. Della gestured at him to come join them.

“Pleasure to see you again, ma’am.” Ezra pecked her on the cheek, looking dapper in herringbone trousers and an open-collar shirt. Della felt that if he’d worn a hat, he would’ve tipped it. “I appreciate the invitation. I imagine… well, I know I’m the last person you want to see.”

“With all due respect, you don’t know me at all, Mr. Walker.”

Ricki flinched, her eyes darting to Ezra.

“You’re right about that, Ms. Della,” he said with a courteous nod. “Beg pardon.”

“No need. Sit down, you two,” she said, gesturing to the love seat. “And eat this food—I ordered so much. I certainly can’t eat it. I just here recently rediscovered the delights of Cream of Wheat. That’s about all I can stomach.” She attempted a smile. She knew she had to tell Ricki the truth. “I know I don’t look well. I’m not well. There’s no easy way to tell your loved ones you’ve got terminal cancer.”

Ricki turned ashen. Ezra, still silent, grasped her hand. She held on for dear life, her knuckles turning white.

“I’ve been ailing since 2016. It comes and goes. But this time’ll be the last time, let the doctors tell it.” She delivered this news matter-of-factly. “But don’t you worry. We all die of something, and my life has been good. I’m happy. I’m not scared of dying—I’m actually curious about it. Besides, life sits shoulder to shoulder with death. It’s around us all the time.

“Lately, I’ve been receiving visitors in my dreams. People I’ve known and loved that’ve passed on. They’re the sweetest, most welcoming dreams. Oftentimes, I even wake up disappointed to be awake. I just want to go with them, as silly as it sounds. But maybe that’s the idea. Our people visit us when it’s time to go, to help us transition and not to be afraid of death. And I’m not. The one thing that bothered me was that I’d seen everyone but my Dr. Bennett. My beloved.”

Her voice cracked on “beloved,” but she moved on. Della had barely said two words in the past couple of days, and now she couldn’t stop. Held rapt, Ricki and Ezra sat across from her—Ricki stricken, and Ezra solemn
—and they didn’t try to interject. So she kept going.

“Last night, he finally came to me. Handsome as the devil, in his fedora and oxfords, and his tickled smile, the one so big his eyes disappear. *Oh*, I liked to pass out from relief. And, without saying it, I knew wherever I am going next, I’ll be safe with him. I’m lucky to have love like that. Some people don’t, you know. Some people go before

they’re loved correctly, or even at all.” She looked Ezra in the eye, a piercing yet kind look. “Do you love Ricki?”

Ezra drew up a little taller in his seat.

“Yes, ma’am.” “With your eyes or your heart?”

“With everything.” Squeezing Ricki’s hand, he held Della’s impenetrable gaze. “For a long time, I thought I knew what my calling was. My grand purpose. But when I met Ricki, I knew I was wrong. I was a fool, thinking that I was born to do anything grander than loving her.”

They heard a sniffle, and all three turned their heads. Naaz stood in the archway, tears streaming down her face.

“Naaz, if you don’t find some business!”

The nurse waved and, patting her eyes with a Kleenex, headed back down the hall.

“If you love her, why did you tell her this malarkey about a curse?

Immortality? My mother, Felice?”

“Because it’s true,” confessed Ezra quietly.

Della’s eyes narrowed. She was testing him. “Did you love my mother?

Answer fast, now. Don’t think up a lie.”

“No,” he said, his voice low. “I didn’t. I couldn’t love at that point in my life. I was full of grief, I was turned around and lost. It looked like I had it all, but I was dulled by all the loss. And Felice… Being with Felice pulled me out of it. She was bright and unafraid, and her strength was contagious. Her energy was intoxicating at times, but I didn’t love her, and she knew it. Her death was my fault. I accept full responsibility. She wanted me to come back with her to Louisiana, and I couldn’t. I wasn’t who she needed me to be.”

Della studied Ezra, unsure if she could trust him. She trusted Ricki, but who would have thought in the final chapter of her life, she’d be called to believe something so outlandish? Here she was, staring into the very young eyes of a man who’d apparently known her mother, the only person who’d ever given her real details about Felice. She had to be sure he wasn’t just insane or delusional. She wanted to do her mother justice.

“Did you make her think you were in love with her?”

He paused, in thought for a long time. After a few moments, he said quietly, “Yes, I suppose I did.”

“’Cause you liked feeling needed, I reckon?”

His mouth twitched. Ezra looked ashamed. He looked exposed, yanked out of his hiding place.

“Thing is, men stay thinking that women are the supporting characters in their story. Ever think you were just a character in hers? I suppose she just

wanted a family, a father for her daughter, a man to legitimize her. Not saying she was right to want those things from you, but you were the man who let her down, on the wrong day."

"So… you believe him?" Ricki asked.

"I didn't say that," Della said haughtily. "I'm speaking in hypotheticals." "I brought something for you." Ezra took an envelope out of his coat pocket. Rising up from the love seat, he handed it to Della.

Steadying her hands, her heart beating fast, she opened the envelope and unearthed a small, delicate, and yellowing photograph. It was an almost totally faded picture of a girl covering her breasts and sitting with her legs crossed on the stump of a tree. She was barely visible under the shadow of a moss-hung oak. Her hair rippled in chin-length waves. Her eyes were wide- set, round, yearning. She looked heartbreakingly young.

"When Felice was dancing at Eden Lounge, one of the chorus girls somehow got ahold of this photograph. She'd taken it when she was younger, back in your hometown. The dancer passed it around, and Felice was ashamed about it. So I bought the photo from the dancer. This was the only copy. I tracked down the photographer and bought the film. I wanted to help her. I just… wanted to help her. One of the last things she said to me was how much she missed you and she loved you. And wanted to be with you."

Della swallowed, a dry lump forming in her throat. She'd waited forever to hear these words.

Blinking back tears, she peered at the photo. It was her mother, undeniably. It was the same face of the woman in the Eden Lounge promo shot Felice had sent back home to Nana. It was Felice. Della's heart sank at the desperation in her mother's eyes. The vulnerability peeking out from the tough exterior.

That's the girl whose honor I defended in the schoolyard, she thought. *I was fighting for this lost, misunderstood girl who used the only powers she had to get ahead. A hungry girl who wanted more. I was fighting for her. I wasn't the only one.*

Ezra had fought for
her, too. She knew
that now.
“I believe you,” she said.
Ezra and Ricki looked at each other and then at Della.
They sat back in

their seats, relief flooding them both. “Thank God,” breathed Ricki.

Yes, Della believed them. But, with growing horror, she realized that meant Ricki really did have only a few more days left. Della might have been at peace with her own passing, but she couldn’t bear it for Ricki. Her granddaughter had things to do! So much beauty to pour into the world. So much good love to bask in.

It wasn’t her time.

“Now,” Della said, her voice weak from talking. “What’s to be done about this curse?”

“There’s nothing we can do,” Ricki said, resigned. “Felice sacrificed herself to activate the curse. The only way to reverse it would be to sacrifice someone else. Which is impossible.”

“Listen to me. And I truly believe this—you’ll be fine,” Della said with a sigh. “Between the two of you? I got a feeling you can fix anything that comes your way. Hex or no hex. But I’m tired; I need to go to bed. Ricki, take that look off your face. This isn’t the last time we’ll see each other. And Ezra?”

“Ma’am?”

“Thank you for this,” she said, holding the photograph to her chest. “Thank you.”

After they left, Della lay on the couch for hours. She kept thinking of what Ezra had said. *She missed you and she loved you. And wanted to be with you.* As Della reflected on this, she reminded herself that she had no regrets. She’d loved hard and well and been loved in return. And she’d checked off almost every item on her bucket list.

1. Dye my hair fluorescent pink.
2. Date a woman. Preferably younger.
3. Visit one of those nude Russian bathhouses.
4. Ride a helicopter over Manhattan.
5. Bury a grudge.

Bury a grudge.

Her heart began to thunder in her chest. Without thinking, she fished a ballpoint pen and Ricki's wildflower seed note cards out of the coffee table drawer. The ones that Ricki said were plantable. In her now-almost-unreadable scrawl, she wrote:

Dear Mama,

I understand. And I love

you. Always,
Your Adelaide

Using all the strength she had, she rose from the chaise lounge. Naaz helped her down the stairs and outside, to the front of Wilde Things. Along the footpath in front of the shop, Ricki had plotted a small garden of lush greenery. With Naaz's assistance, Della dug a small hole with her hands. She buried her note in the rich soil. Patting dirt over the hole, she said a silent prayer that the paper would birth a colorful array of wildflowers. From her forgiveness, a permanent flowering would grow in tribute to a woman born at the wrong time and in the wrong place—a doomed girl who, with the right care, love, and support, might've learned to use her unfathomable powers for good.

Della buried her grudge. And now she was at peace.

CHAPTER 23

A LOVE SONG FOR RICKI WILDE

February 28–29,
2024 Leap Day

It was time.

The hours leading up to leap day were warm, in that weird, climate- changey way. To Ricki, the world was off-balance. Everything felt disjointed, surreal, and hazy—especially the energy between Ricki and Ezra. Time seemed to hiccup, jumping from 11:00 a.m. to 3:00 p.m., then to 4:30. Lost in sorrow, the two of them barely spoke for most of the day. The level of helplessness Ezra felt had ratcheted from cruel to torturous. There was no way to save Ricki. He'd tried to preemptively check her in to the ER, but as it turned out, there was no way to hospitalize and prevent a totally healthy woman's alleged future death due to circumstances unknown.

Ricki stopped by Tuesday's condo for a final farewell, but her best friend refused to entertain her dark fate. Instead of saying goodbye, she gave Ricki an aromatherapeutic facial and a glass of chardonnay. Ms. Della wouldn't say goodbye, either. When Ricki knocked on her door—face dour, shoulders slumped—the elder woman shook her finger in her face, handed her a Lorna Doone, and sent her on her way.

A world without Ricki was too outrageous for her people

to accept.
She didn’t contact her family. Saying goodbye to them would involve

explaining why, which was impossible. Fading away felt cleaner, somehow. Kinder. Deep down, she prayed that her sisters had told her parents that she was doing well, even if it was a long shot, considering she'd unceremoniously booted them from her abode. She hoped they'd told them about Ezra, his delicious meal, her gorgeous shop, and maybe they would even share the article about her viral flowers. She hoped her dad knew she'd found success, that she'd built all of this herself.

Ricki bargained with every god she could think of for more time, a few extra weeks, even. Days. Hours. But she knew it was futile. Her story was over. Their story was over. The time for deluding themselves into a false sense of security or safety had passed.

As the afternoon drifted into early evening, the two looked at each other across Ricki's tidy foldout dining table. They'd been silent for ages, picking at their take-out pad thai and avoiding each other's eyes. Finally, Ricki broke their solemn trance.

"This wasn't supposed to happen like this. I always thought I'd die an old lady in my sleep. Remember the gray-haired couple who died together in their bed at the end of *Titanic*? When I was a kid, I thought it was the most devastatingly romantic thing."

"That was horrible. They drowned," Ezra said with a sigh, his eyes pools of sadness.

"They drowned *old*, after a life fully lived. And they were with each other at the end. Sleeping peacefully."

Letting out a heavy exhale, Ezra shut his eyes and rubbed his brows. This conversation, their reality—pure hell. And there was no way to escape it.

An idea surfaced in his brain, as if literally rising from the murky depths of a dark sea.

"Maybe that's how we square it, then. We'll do like that couple."

Ricki lowered her fork and looked at him quizzically. "What, sleep through it?"

"Of all the choices, it seems like the softest landing." Ezra reached across the tiny table, taking her hand in his.

Dr. Arroyo-Abril had lectured him often about the perils of using avoidance as a coping mechanism. Respectfully, he didn’t give a fuck about her warning tonight.

So they bought an over-the-counter sleeping aid and a bottle of

obnoxiously expensive white wine—Le Montrachet Grand Cru 2015—and Ricki whipped up a tray of weed brownies. No doubt, the combination would knock them out before midnight, as the twenty-eighth bled into the twenty-ninth. It was a solid plan. If she had to go, at least she wouldn't feel it. She just… wouldn't wake up. And Ezra would be spared the agony of watching his love fade away.

At 6:00 p.m., as Ricki pulled the brownies out of the oven, Ezra and Ricki eyed each other, their expressions twisted with sadness. Her emotions mirrored his; they knew without words that they both felt the same thing. Solemnly, they gathered a blanket, pillows, and a duvet, along with the wine; and as inevitably as they were drawn to each other and to Harlem, an invisible force led Ricki and Ezra upstairs. As if pulled by an invisible string, they were compelled to return to the roof, the scene of the crime. They headed up there in silence and laid out the bedding. For hours, they held each other, cloaked in the darkness of this strangely balmy evening. Ezra sat up, holding Ricki close, her back resting against his chest. His arms were tight around her, clasping her hands. They couldn't bear to not touch each other. Especially now.

This is it, thought Ricki, gazing up into the endless sky.

The end.

And Ricki had dressed for The End. She was wearing a sweeping, low- cut tangerine velvet gown from 1961 (per ReclaimedVintageGowns.com), topped with a faux-fur ivory duster. The velvet was bare in some places, and the lining was torn, but the dress held a sense of grandeur. She wasn't about to face the afterlife not draped in something epic. After all, it was the last thing she'd ever wear.

"I don't regret any of it," she said with bleary finality. Holding the wine bottle by the neck, she took a long, hearty sip and passed it over her shoulder to Ezra.

"What don't you regret?"

"Us. I wouldn't take back a second I've spent with you."

Ezra clenched his eyes shut, trying to hold on to her words. He didn't deserve her forgiveness, and he certainly didn't deserve her love.

“I’m so sorry, Ricki.”

“Please don’t be sorry. No more apologizing, okay? It’s not your fault.

You couldn’t have stopped this.”

“You’ve never done anything to harm anyone in your life. You shouldn’t

have to pay for my mistakes. Why you?”

“Why me, why you, why Felice?” she asked softly. “We could go around in circles forever. And we don’t have that time.”

She squeezed his hands tighter. Her words hung in the air, dismantling them both. Cutting through their false sense of calm.

“What will you do?” she asked. “You know. After.”

“I don’t know.” His voice was deep, raspy, pain etched in every syllable. “There is no after. I just see everything going blank.” He dropped his head into the hollow of her shoulder, breathing in her skin, her hair. “I won’t feel anything real ever again. Nothing will matter.”

Moments passed, and together they gazed up into the sky. The moon was so red. It looked disproportionately big and low. A blood moon. From their vantage point on the roof, it was a mesmerizing, surreal sight.

In her short time in Harlem, Ricki had come very close to living the life she’d always dreamed of and becoming who she’d always hoped to be. So many of her dreams had been realized, and she’d finally started to see the power in what she could create. It was heart filling. And the only thing better? The idea of her and Ezra together. Till they were old and gray, full on a satisfying life.

“I thought I’d live well into my nineties,” whispered Ricki. “Achieving the wisdom that’s supposed to come with old age. Does it ever happen?”

“Still waiting,” said Ezra, his voice sounding thin. “You know, you might not get to experience being old, but look at all you’ve done.” He gestured at the neighborhood below them, where people were cozy in their apartments, going about their evening, living their normal, lucky lives. “You’ll live on in all the plants and flowers around Harlem. Your art is woven into the fabric of this place now. And everyone who knows you will carry it with them,” he said, his breath hitching. “I’ll carry you with me forever.”

Overwhelmed, Ricki nodded and burrowed deeper against his chest.

After a long time, she spoke.

“You know what I can’t stop thinking about?” she asked. “What’s that?”

“The song you played for me. The one I keep hearing in my dreams. Our song. God, it’s perfect. It’s like the blood in my veins put to music. I’m taking it with me.”

Ricki gripped his right hand in both of hers and held it against her heart. A small sigh escaped her lips. Ezra stored the sound of it away in his brain, for safekeeping.

“Where did the melody come from?” she asked. “Tell me the story behind it.”

“You,” he murmured, his mouth against the top of her head. “You’re the story. I’ve been composing it for you for one hundred twenty-four years.”

“Oh,” she said, pushing down her swelling emotions. She didn’t want to fall to pieces. Ricki had hoped to face the end with grace, with some semblance of calm. “What is it called?” was all she managed to say.

A title had never occurred to him. It would’ve made sense to name it, but the song lived in his soul, not his brain; it lived somewhere beyond sense and reason. He took a deep breath, tightened his strong arms around her, and named it.

“A Love Song for Ricki Wilde.”

As the hour drew closer to midnight, the air grew cooler. Their breath went smoky. Their words ran out. The wine and brownies were gone. Now they lay in their makeshift bed, curled on their sides, facing each other: nose to nose, knees to knees, hand in hand. By 11:00 p.m., the contours of the world started to blur. The city sounds of Harlem started to silence. Soon, that ostentatious, oversized moon barely even registered. The boundlessness of their sorrow humbled even the blood moon.

At 11:10, Ricki and Ezra decided it was time and swallowed a sleeping pill each. Soon, the only thing that registered was the heat generated by their bodies. The beating of their hearts. Their soft, steady breath. Eventually, they fell into a meditative lull. There was no turning back.

The last time Ricki checked her phone, it was 11:25. As Ricki started to slip into sleep, she saw sense-memory snapshots, long forgotten and utterly random, from her twenty-eight years of living. Watching Rashida win Miss

Georgia Teen on TV, her earliest memory. Feeling the rough crinoline under her kindergarten graduation dress scratch her thighs. Tasting mussels for the first time at her cousin’s Vineyard house. Panicking as her car spun out of control on an icy rural road four winters ago. Brushing her lips against the skin below Ezra’s ear, a spot she’d never even noticed on another man.

They were disparate, microscopic memories. But they added up to a rich life.

Ezra last checked his at 11:40. Before the clock struck midnight, sleep overtook them both. It was exactly as they'd planned. As the twenty-eighth dissolved into the twenty-ninth, they weren't awake to witness it.

Thank God for small blessings. For the first time since they met each other, time was on Ezra and Ricki's side.

Ezra seized awake at 8:00 a.m., bolting upright in a jerky, abrupt motion. The sun was high and unbearably bright, streaming down on him, slicing through the cold. It was freezing, actually. Finally, appropriate February-in- New-York weather.

February. It was February. *It was February 29.*

His heart pounded in his ears. Fire rushed through his veins. Jaw clenched, he looked down. Ricki was lying peacefully at his side, curled into herself. She was so still. If he didn't know better, he'd think she was just sleeping soundly.

His Ricki. Here she was, the end of everything for him. It was an unbearable loss he'd never return from. How could he?

Ezra clenched his eyes shut, willing this to be one long nightmare. In one shaky gust, he exhaled all the breath in his body. It took all the courage he had to reach out and touch her shoulder. He needed to feel her skin, to feel her pulse. Carefully, he reached around to place two fingers on the inside of her wrist, the way he'd seen it done in movies. It felt so clinical doing this, surreal. He stopped. He couldn't.

With a low groan of misery, Ezra stared out into the white New York City sky, beyond the skyline, skyscrapers, and mile-high housing developments. He peered off into nothing, his mind flooded with grief, and he realized he was crying only when the hot tears dampened his skin. Ezra

hadn’t cried in at least fifty years, maybe more.

He wept and wept, his shoulders shaking and his eyes clenching shut. He wept loudly till his throat was raw and his eye sockets felt bruised.

Great, racking sobs of the utterly hopeless. “Jesus, baby. What’s wrong?”

Ezra’s eyes flew open. He whipped his head to the right. Ricki had rolled over onto her back and was staring up at him with bleary, barely lucid concern. Her coils were sleep rumpled, and her eyelids were at half-mast.

“What? *What? WHAT?*”

“Why’re you so worked up?” Drowsily, she sat up next to him. She yawned.

She froze.

And then she screamed, her hands flying up to her cheeks. Frantically, she began patting herself up and down, all over.

“EZRA, I’M HERE! AM I ALIVE?” “YOU ARE! *YOU’RE ALIVE!*”

And then the moment erupted into pure chaos. Powered by a bounding surge of pure joy and unfiltered shock, Ricki pressed her fingers under her jaw, feeling for a pulse and sob-shouting with glee as she felt her blood pumping in her veins. Simultaneously, Ezra’s hands roamed her body with a frantic, mad intensity, squeezing and clutching every piece of her skin he came across. He smothered her everywhere with kisses, from her face to her feet. He plunged his hands into her hair, tangling them into her coils. He couldn’t stop touching her. *She was alive!*

Ezra shot up to his feet and pulled Ricki with him, lifting her up in an exuberant embrace. Now that they were brimming with energy and feeling —their skin tingling, nerve endings awakening, minds sharpening—they realized how utterly flattened they’d been by grief this past week. Overcome, Ezra made a choked sound and chanted her name—“*Ricki, Ricki, Ricki, Ricki*”—over and over, praying a silent thank-you to a god he suspected was listening.

The roof seemed to quake beneath them. Maybe it was from Ezra and Ricki, shaking from their tremors of euphoria.

Finally, after they released each other from an endless hug, Ezra lowered Ricki back to the ground. He palmed her cheek, beaming ecstatically, eyes still wet. Ricki's face was lit with joy. He bent down to kiss her, but before his lips met hers, she pushed him away.

"Ezra," she gasped out. "Wait, why did I beat the curse? Who did you sacrifice? Did you kill someone while I was sleeping?"

He laughed in giddy relief. “Yeah, I snuck downstairs and…” Then he froze.

“What?”

“You’re alive! Which means that the curse is broken.” “I know, I know!”

“So I must be… mortal?”

Clarity flooded Ricki’s face. She stood there in front of him, paralyzed.

I must be mortal.

“Where’s the wine bottle?” he blurted out. *It can’t be.*

Without understanding, she reached for the empty bottle to her right and quickly handed it to him.

“Stand back,” he demanded. And then he smashed the bottle against the roof, the glass shattering. Swiftly, he grabbed a shard and, before Ricki could protest, drove it into his palm. Blood instantly spouted from the wound. And it fucking *hurt*. It hurt the way he remembered feeling pain a hundred years ago. It wasn’t the vague, quick-to-disappear itch that a Perennial feels. It hurt with an alarming, piercing clarity. The hope he hadn’t dared to hold on to started to grow.

With an agonized grimace, he held his palm in front of his face, blinking mutely in shock. The blood didn’t magically stop flowing as soon as it started. And the wound didn’t instantly close back up, healing itself. Very un-Perennial-like.

Ezra bled and felt the pain, just like an ordinary person would. Like a mortal would.

Ricki wasn’t sure what was happening, but she definitely wasn’t going to stand by while Ezra bled out in front of her. Thinking quickly, she ripped a pillowcase off a pillow and wrapped it tightly around his wrist, creating a tourniquet. She ripped off another one and bandaged his palm. This was insane. He felt things he hadn’t experienced in a century. Out of nowhere, his wrists ached from the tendonitis he’d suffered pre-curse, thanks to years of holding his hands the wrong way at the piano as an untrained kid in Fallon County. His lower right wisdom tooth smarted. Abruptly, he sneezed.

Dear God, he forgot he had allergies!
He erupted in unbridled,
delighted laughter. “Ezra, are you
okay? What’s happening…”
“I’m not a Perennial anymore. I’m me, before the curse. I think?” He

pressed the wound on his palm and flinched, sucking in air through his teeth. Then he sneezed again. “I haven’t felt like this since 1928!”

“No.”

“Yes.”

“No!”

“I swear, Ricki,” he rasped, his voice tremulous with awe and wild surprise. “I’m a normal twenty-eight-year-old. *Jesus fuck.* Pardon.”

“Well. A normal, *modern* twenty-eight-year-old wouldn’t apologize,” she pointed out, grinning madly.

His face broke into a radiant smile. “Then I’m not fucking sorry.”

And then they crashed back into each other’s arms, melting into a raw, endless kiss. Drunk on their good fortune.

They were too impassioned to wonder where their good fortune had come from. They were too euphoric to care.

The two luckiest lovers in the world rushed downstairs to share their news. Ms. Della would be beside herself to see that they’d made it. Or maybe she wouldn’t be surprised at all, considering that she, like Tuesday, had utterly rejected the idea of the curse killing Ricki.

Ricki knocked on the grandiose oak door and waited. She rang the doorbell, and nothing. Did Ms. Della have her walking club that morning? She was definitely too ill to keep up with her walks. In her living room the other day, she’d looked horribly frail. Even her voice had faded, like she’d dissolve to dust from the effort of raising it a single note.

She wasn’t well, and it couldn’t be denied.

Ricki and Ezra looked at each other, unspoken worry passing between them. She raised her fist to knock again, when Naaz opened the door.

Her golden-amber complexion was sallow and drained of

all radiance. Her eyes were bloodshot, and she was sniffling. The nurse, usually so bright and cheery, looked like she'd been awake all night.

Ricki's stomach dropped. "Naaz…"

"She's gone," she whispered. "Ms. Della… she passed. I'm so deeply

sorry. I know how much you loved her, Ricki."

Instinctively, Ezra slipped his arm around Ricki's waist. She slumped against his side, the wind punched out of her.

"But… it happened so fast," whispered Ricki. "I wasn't ready yet; I didn't say goodbye. She didn't want to say goodbye…"

Naaz shook her head. "The cancer would've taken her soon. But Ms.
Della did it herself."

Ezra flinched. "Herself?"

"W-we don't understand. What do you mean?" Ricki's voice was rising as panic and grief swirled inside her.

"Morphine. She knew where I kept it. And she took half the bottle." The kind nurse reached out to pat Ricki's arm, with a faint smile. "Ricki, this isn't my first time experiencing this with very elderly, terminal patients. If it's any consolation, exercising some semblance of control over the way they leave this world is often the most comforting thing for them. You know what she was like—Ms. Della was a force to be reckoned with. She died on her own terms. I don't think it sat well with her, being at the mercy of an illness she couldn't fight."

All Ricki could do was nod, her arm wrapped around Ezra's lower back, grabbing fistfuls of his hoodie, and his arms around her shoulders, helping to keep her standing.

Ezra nodded with absolute understanding. "When
did she pass?" "Just before midnight."

Ricki's heart plummeted. She pulled away from Ezra, the two exchanging a fraught glance.

Naaz reached into the pocket of her scrubs and pulled out a small note card. It was one from the batch of Ricki's homemade paper. "She left you a note. Actually, it's for both of you."

She handed it to Ricki. Their names were written on the envelope in Ms.
Della's spidery cursive handwriting.

"Want to come in? Grab a bite, have some coffee? I'm just filling out some paperwork. Della's great-nephew on her husband's side, her next of kin, flew up from Atlanta

and is with her now. At the funeral home."

"No," said Ricki. "No, we're fine. Thank you for telling us. And for taking such good care of Ms. Della." She was too dazed to speak eloquently, to cry, to wail, to yell. Instead, she drew Naaz into a brief

embrace. She couldn't go into the apartment, not yet. Ms. Della's death would feel too real.

"You take care, okay?" Naaz offered a thin, sad smile before shutting the door.

Dumbfounded, Ricki and Ezra sat on the top step of the stoop. She opened the note. In a voice that didn't sound like her own, she read it out loud.

Dear Ricki and Ezra,

Now, stop it. Ricki, don't be sad. I was ready to go. I've lived a beautiful life. I've experienced great love. The one thing my grandmother and mother wanted, but never had. I've felt guilty about that. For being the lucky one.

I can't think of a nobler cause than to die for love. You see, love should never hurt. Rejection, abandonment, cruelty, so forth, those things hurt. But love, itself? No.

Ricki and Ezra, I couldn't stand by and watch you hurt, when I could sacrifice myself to save you.

Promise me that you'll choose to love each other hard.

Every day.

And that you'll pass it on. This will be my legacy.

I always wondered what my purpose was, and you gave it to me, Ricki. Being your grandmother has been one of my greatest joys. Thank you.

That's all, for now. Off to see my sweet doctor, again.

Always,
Ms. Della, your new angel

Ricki and Ezra were here. Ms. Della was gone. And she was, henceforth and forevermore, their hero.

EPILOGUE

February 29,
2036 Leap Day

You'd think that Dr. Bennett and I spend all day sipping tea in the ancestral plane. Well, that's not *all* we do. I'm a busy woman. I have so many folks to look after! My life was long and full, and my friends are plentiful. Now, I certainly don't rank my people in terms of importance. Unimaginably tacky. But if I did, Ricki and Ezra would be at the top of the list.

I've always kept an eye on them.

I've watched Wilde Things grow and grow, taking over the entire brownstone. Richard Wilde Sr. was so proud, which made Richard Wilde Jr. even prouder. He presented Ricki with a business proposal: to buy a small share of her business and build Wilde Things kiosks in his franchises. But Ricki declined, staying true to her original vision. Which, in turn, made *me* proud.

I tell you, it tickles me that she and Ezra never told a soul about the curse. After a while, they were so lost in the wonderful banality of their everyday lives that they stopped thinking about it. Only Tuesday knew, and she never breathed a word. She had her own stuff going on. Opening that facial spa and running capers with… an *unlikely-looking* fella she met years ago at somebody's wedding. Tuesday's a whole other story, and like I said, I'm a busy woman.

Ezra's been busy, too. He earned his bachelor's, master's, and PhD in music theory and composition from NYU and is now one of Juilliard's most popular professors.

His marquee class, The Science of Pop Hits 201, has endless waiting lists. I've sat in a few classes, myself. I can attest to those

kids hootin’ and hollerin’ while he tells the secret backstories of all kinds of popular songs. You’d think, just one time, they’d ask him how he knows.

Ezra still gets tripped up on modern quirks, sometimes. I overheard students giggling at how he actually printed out syllabi for his class, and on a *dot matrix printer*. Now, I don’t quite know what that is, so I can’t comment. I can say that Ezra’s devoted to his students, but no more than he was to putting down roots with Ricki.

A few years after the curse was broken, he sold his old house. And then Ezra and Ricki bought their own brownstone, a run-down fixer-upper around the corner from Wilde Things. Good God, it was a disaster at first. Unlivable, from the roota to the toota. Leaky in the winter, boiling in the summer, no modern conveniences. They fixed it up, though, and it’s a showstopper. It’d be even prettier if their schnauzer wasn’t hell-bent on chewing everything to bits. They call him SW3. Given name Stevie Wonder-Wilde-Walker.

No telling what they were thinking with that dog. It sheds all over their good furniture, and that name sounds like a *Star Wars* creature. None of my business, though.

What *is* my business? The wedding of my favorite two people, at their gorgeous home. And today is the day. A leap day, if you can believe it.

Frankly, the wedding surprised me. Ricki and Ezra never had designs on marriage. What would marriage prove when they’d fought an actual life- and-death battle for their love? But in the end, they did it for their little girls: Hazel, Minnie, Lo, and tiny Della. (Now *that’s* a name.) Last winter, all four of the girls sat on Santa’s lap, begging him for a wedding.

The ceremony, held earlier today in their home, was breathtaking. Tuesday was the maid of honor. Hazel, Minnie, Lo, and Della were flower girls. SW3 was a canine ring bearer. Again, none of my business. Naaz put her former career as a bat mitzvah party motivator to good use and served as an incessantly cheerful deejay. One of Ezra’s professor friends, a violinist named Glenn, played “A Love

Song for Ricki Wilde" as Ricki walked down the aisle. Now, *that* was a sight to see. The way I wept.

But I had to giggle later when, during Glenn's toast, he told Ezra it felt like he'd known him forever. If only he knew they'd played together on the recording of two Toni Braxton ballads, back in 1991.

Ricki and Ezra looked like cake toppers. True to form, Ricki wore a

vintage Ann Cole Lowe gown, circa 1947. Ezra wore a custom tux tailored by Ricki herself, and he looked like he'd stepped out of the pictures, sharp as a tack with his new salt-and-pepper beard. I knew, just looking at them, that they were happier than they'd ever been. They're forty now, with a bit more wisdom to them. Their relationship has ripened into something far weightier than new love's passion. It's secure now. A true partnership with small, day-to-day moments of quiet, of safety, of comfort.

I know that feeling well.

During a busy moment at their living-room reception, when everyone was dancing madly—Ezra was doing the Cupid Shuffle with his daughters while donning a princess tiara that Minnie had proudly plopped on his head —Ricki snuck outside into the crisp, breezy air.

Lifting her dress, the bride quickly walked up the block and around the corner to West 137th Street, not stopping till she reached 225½. For several moments, she stood before the building, my old home, mere feet from the entrance of her shop. Ricki had a wistful smile painted on her face. Grasping her handcrafted bouquet, a hand-tied mix of antique green hydrangeas, tea roses, and café au lait dahlias, she closed her eyes and spoke aloud.

"Thank you, Ms. Della," she said. "My angel."

The slight ruffle of the wind was my response. It delicately tousled Ricki's hair, kissing her cheeks and rustling the skirt of her gown. And it carried the off-season fragrance of night-blooming jasmine. A scent as inexplicable and inevitable as love itself.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

First off, thank you to the people who've been reading my stuff since my early days as a fashion magazine editor and beauty blogger (SYB Babes, stand up). Your enthusiasm kept me afloat during some tricky years, ladies. And the fact that you're still interested in my stories? Gratifying and humbling, beyond belief. A massive thanks to my newer readers, too—your posts, playlists, reviews, and DMs mean the absolute world to me.

I'd like to thank Jason Moran, *the* preeminent jazz pianist and composer of our time. (He also happens to be my cousin, not to brag.) Back before Ezra Walker had a name, you took time out of your schedule to school me on Willie the Lion, Duke Ellington, and James P. Johnson; and "Carolina Shout," and stride. So much of Ezra's characterization came out of that one conversation! Next time we're in Cane River, sir, meat pies are on me.

I was clueless about flowers until I became an editorial director at Estée Lauder Companies, and had to write perfume copy. Learning about florals (like night-blooming jasmine!) from genius fragrance developers Karyn Khoury and Helen Murphy piqued my interest—thanks for the education! And endless gratitude to brilliant florists Kat Flower, Stacie Lee, and Alexis Denis, for giving me insider info on what it's like to be a floral designer/entrepreneur.

To my editor, Seema Mahanian, you always know how to coax the good-good stuff out of me; to encourage me to dig deeper and Go There. How lucky am I to be edited by a woman whose romantic sensibilities and pop-culture heart matches mine? I'm also hugely thankful to designers Albert

Tang and Sarah Congdon for creating yet another epically perfect cover! And to my mind-reading, superstar agent, Cherise Fisher—without your brains and tenacity, I never would’ve had a second act in publishing.

We’ve come so far, my Monserattian queen. Forevermore, #allhats.

Thank you to my wonderful family and friends—notably my brother-in- law, Adam Gantt, who let me borrow an anecdote he shared about finding an antique piano in an old house. “That’s what’s up” indeed!

Finally, I must thank my husband, Francesco, who is the most patient man on Earth, and also the most handsome and most skilled in the kitchen. You put up with my emotional artist bullshit, and keep me sane(ish). I love you, tremendously. And to Lina, my teen dream daughter, you delight me daily with your witticisms, perspective, and concerningly dark plot advice (“How about a murder? Someone should die.”). You’re my world, ladybug. And, as always, you’re banned from reading my books till you’re thirty- five.

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READING GROUP GUIDE

Discussion Questions

1. Harlem creates a vibrant, exciting backdrop for this love story, a place for creatives and artists to find themselves and flourish. Describe the ways in which Harlem has changed over time in the novel. Discuss how this neighborhood functions within the novel—what role does it play beyond just a setting?
2. Ricki feels like an outsider in her family, never quite fitting in or meeting their expectations. In what ways does this dynamic challenge Ricki to achieve her goals, and how does it hold her back?
3. The power of love and relationships is a central theme throughout the novel, and we learn that both Ricki and Ezra have had tumultuous romantic, platonic, and familial relationships. How is their romance different from ones they've had in the past, and how does it change their other relationships?
4. Ms. Della is Ricki's guardian angel from the moment they meet, providing her with the support and encouragement that Ricki's been missing. How is her outlook on life different from Ricki's? Who in your life has been a Ms. Della figure?
5. Ezra's past is a long and painful journey that takes him from one heartbreak to the next. Describe the mechanisms he's developed to cope with his grief. How does opening his heart to Ricki lead him on the path toward healing?

6. What does *A Love Song for Ricki Wilde* say about the power of love and vulnerability?

7. Ezra is preoccupied with the idea of legacy; and later, so is Ricki. How do they each leave their mark on the world? What does it say about what they value most?
8. Tuesday Rowe becomes Ricki's closest friend. Though she's fiercely confident in some ways, she's wounded in others. How did her years as a child star impact her adult sense of self?
9. There are almost one hundred years between Breeze's 1927 interview with Olive Randall and Ricki's 2024 interview with Clementine Rhodes. But the two journalists similarly imply that Black culture is given value when it's sanctioned by white people. How does Ricki push back on this idea? Discuss the ways you see this still happening in the world today.
10. Ricki and Ezra are described as the "two luckiest lovers in the world" (here). How would you describe their love story? Do you think their romance is entirely due to fate and destiny? Or, is it due to choices they made and personal growth?

Author Q&A

Q: What prompted you to write this story? Was there a specific character that worked as initial inspiration, a line you were itching to write that sparked an idea?

A: I swear, the plot just *arrived* in my mind during a bout of insomnia! Nothing like that has ever happened to me. Smaller details would evolve and change, but I had these core elements: a cursed Harlem Renaissance musician, a free-spirited florist who flees her family for Harlem, destined soulmates, and the brownstone where it all goes down. I wrote the outline in a fever. But I was nervous to share it with my editor, because I thought the mystical elements would sound far-fetched.

Q: The flashbacks to the Harlem Renaissance are filled with so much wonderful, rich detail. What did your research consist of? Was there a fact or story that you discovered and loved but weren't able to include in the novel?

A: I'm a massive 1920s buff. I love the silent films, the stars, the style, the literature, and especially the Renaissance. I watched endless clips of Ezra's contemporaries like Duke Ellington and Willie the Lion. I read every book I could get my hands on about the cultural luminaries of the era. My favorites were Yuval Taylor's *Zora and Langston: A Story of Friendship and Betrayal* and Allon Schoener's *Harlem on My Mind: Cultural Capital of*

Black America, 1900–1968. There's so much I wish I could've included, like a cameo from Gladys Bentley, the drag king of the Renaissance, or Blanche Dunn, the era's most glamorous It-girl socialite.

Q: It's particularly poignant to read about the "Sepia Paradise" of Harlem in the '20s versus the Harlem of today. What did you want to show in the depiction of this neighborhood and community?

A: Modern Harlem is vibrant and exciting in its own right. But many landmarks of the '20s have been lost to time, either due to the natural evolution of a city or gentrification. Harlem has seen so many ups and downs over the past century. But the shadow of those Jazz Age sights, sounds, and stars is everywhere, if you really look. I wanted to point out that sometimes history is right under your nose.

Q: Was there a part of the novel that you were most excited to write?

A: I couldn't wait for the part when Ezra reveals the curse to Ricki. It was the only part of my outline that was a huge question mark, because I couldn't fathom what it would be like to wake up after transformative sex with your hot new boyfriend, and have him tell you such a wild story! Ricki's shock and Ezra's nervousness made for some funny tension, I think.

Q: Ricki's deep desire to cultivate beauty and to create something of her own is a powerful force throughout the novel. Are there any parts of Ricki that you see in yourself as an artist and creator?

A: Definitely! In my other life, I was a beauty writer for fashion magazines and makeup brands. Like Ricki, I love vintage couture, fashion photography, an exquisite piece of stationery, a lipstick in the perfect shade of sun-kissed coral—I'm inspired by beauty, in all its forms. To me, it's important to show that it's valid for Black women to take such things seriously. Growing up, I didn't see this in media.

Q: Ezra is incredibly romantic and dreamy. How did his character come to be? Was he based on anyone in particular?

A: Ezra isn’t based on anyone, specifically. He’s what I imaged a Renaissance pianist would be like. Someone who went from the depths of rural poverty to the heights of fame—in less than five years. Back then,

Black Harlem was heavily populated by people who'd fled the South during the Great Migration. More often than not, they left with the shirts on their backs, headed to an unknown, hyper-modern city with a slew of new social rules they had to learn, fast. It was a terrifying, exciting time. With Ezra, I wanted to explore what happened to someone whose ambition, dreams, and talent were bigger than his surroundings—and how his passionate heart would handle the challenges thrown at him.

Q: Was there any aspect of the writing process that you found particularly challenging?

A: I don't enjoy writing about Jim Crow America. I dreaded describing the church fire at the hands of the KKK, or the scene with Sonny and the Irishmen and cops. As a Black woman with roots in this country that stretch back for centuries, it's an inherited-trauma thing. I don't like to tap into those feelings. But those details were necessary for the story. And it's the truth of this country.

Q: *A Love Song for Ricki Wilde* is filled with so many pop culture Easter eggs, and with the history of twentieth-century music—Ezra has had a hand in so many seminal songs! How did you choose which songs Ezra would be a part of?

A: Long story short, I grew up in a pop culture house. Movies, TV, and music were a massive part of how my family related to each other. In high school, I bought a big, thick book of all the Billboard number one hits from 1950 to 1992. (It's falling apart, but I still have it!) For each song, there was a two-page spread explaining its origins: i.e., the recording process, the inspiration, juicy trivia, etc. I loved nerding out over this stuff. I basically memorized the whole book. So, I flipped through my mental Rolodex of hits and landed on ones that I could insert Ezra into. The lyrics of "Voodoo Chile" actually informed the scene when Felice curses Ezra.

Q: Voodoo plays a significant part in this novel and is a part of Eva Mercy's family history in *Seven Days in June*. What draws you to

write about it?

A: My maternal family is Louisiana French Creole, and thusly, voodoo has always been something I've been aware of. I just love the mystery of it, and how it's such a deeply Black religion, something we *owned* at a time when this country wanted us powerless. Unfortunately, white supremacist structures decided it was a dark, inherently evil practice, and therefore, voodoo gets a bad rap. But it's a fascinating aspect of our spiritual history.

Q: What is your favorite love song?

A: Prince's 1983 cover of Joni Mitchell's "A Case of You." His impassioned voice, her poetic lyrics—beyond romantic.

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Tia Williams had a fifteen-year career as a beauty editor for magazines including *Elle*, *Glamour*, *Lucky*, *Teen People*, and *Essence*. In 2004, she pioneered the beauty-blog industry with her award-winning site, Shake Your Beauty. She wrote the bestselling debut novel *The Accidental Diva* and penned two young adult novels, *It Chicks* and *Sixteen Candles*. Her award-winning novel *The Perfect Find* was adapted into a Netflix movie starring Gabrielle Union. Her latest novel is the *New York Times* bestseller and Reese's Book Club pick *Seven Days in June*, published by Grand Central.

Tia currently lives with her daughter and her husband in Brooklyn.

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